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You Just Had that Gut Feeling': Film, Memory, and the Lynching of James Byrd, Jr

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'YOU JUST HAD THAT GUT FEELING'

Film, Memory, and the Lynching of James Byrd, Jr.

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William Brian Piper

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of

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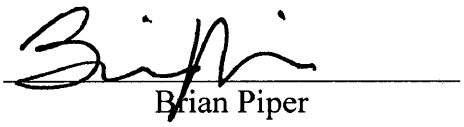

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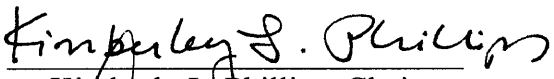

Kimberly L. Phillips, Chair

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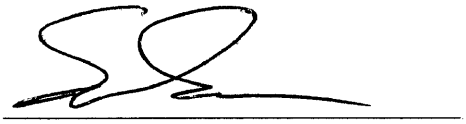

Scott Nelson, Professor

To Mom, Dad, and Corey for their endless support and the rare prodding. To my American Studies classmates for their suggestions and distractions.

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ABSTRACT

The 1998 dragging of James Byrd, Jr. in Jasper, Texas prompted many different reactions. Two films have attempted to convey the gravity of Byrd's death and his hometown's struggle to overcome that trauma. In widely different styles, *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* build upon well-established African American traditions of remembering and representing racial violence, and thus help to orient James Byrd's death in America's long history of lynching. While powerful, the dramatic physical reenactments of *Jasper, Texas,* actually reinforce the objectification of an African American victim. At the same time, the simplifications and fictionalizations of *Jasper, Texas* help to humanize the events so that a broad audience can feel an emotional connection with the people of Jasper. In a more subtle manner, *Two Towns of Jasper* magnifies gaps in the way that black and white Jasperites perceived the death of James Byrd, Jr. in order to probe fissures between memories of racial violence and to problematize issues of race and racial politics. *Two Towns* relies on cognitive, reflexive processes in order to secure the death of James Byrd and the pain it caused in the collective memory of an audience. The two films produced in the wake of the Byrd lynching remind us that racial violence persists in many ways, and reveal how strategies for representing that violence can have real and important consequences.

'YOU JUST HAD THAT GUT FEELING'

Film, Memory, and the Lynching of James Byrd, Jr.

June 7, 1998

A little before 2:00 A.M. on Sunday June 7, 1998, James Byrd, Jr. left a party at his friend's house. Without a car and unable to secure a ride home, Byrd began walking towards his one-bedroom apartment in East Jasper, Texas. Casually thumbing for a ride, Byrd did not entice anyone to pick him up, including teenager Steven Scott. Finally, Byrd waved down a late-model, primer gray pickup truck, driven by Shawn Berry. Also in the truck where two other white men, Bill King and Russell Brewer, as well as a cooler full of cold beer. Berry offered Byrd a beer, and a ride. James Byrd, Jr. hopped into the open bed of the truck. As Steven Scott walked into his house at around 2:30, he saw James Byrd in the back of a truck, speeding towards the outskirts of town. Other than the three white men in the truck, Scott was the last person to see James Byrd, Jr. alive.

Sean Berry drove down Huff Creek Road for a few miles before he pulled onto an out-of-use logging road. Once the truck stopped, at least one of the white men shared a cigarette with Byrd. At some point the three white men attacked James Byrd; how long Byrd fought back remains unclear. The alcohol Byrd had consumed that night and his epilepsy suggest he was quickly overcome. The attackers beat Byrd with bottles and their hands, kicking him viciously once they got him to the ground. During the struggle, a button from Byrd's shirt, his shoes, wallet, baseball hat, and dentures where shaken from him and left around the scene of the beating.

All three assailants claim varying degrees of non-participation in the beating of James Byrd, Jr.; evidence indicates otherwise. Byrd's blood splattered on clothes worn by all three attackers, as well as all of their footwear. Together, they broke nearly all of Byrd's ribs. The three killers spray painted his face, body, and clothes with black paint. They pulled down Byrd's pants and underwear, and used them to help wrap the end of a chain around Byrd's ankles. They secured the other end to the back of Berry's pickup. Sean Berry got in the driver's seat and began to drag James Byrd, Jr. down the logging road and onto the pavement of Huff Creek Road. Still, Byrd remained conscious and balanced himself on his elbows in an attempt to hold his head off of the asphalt. The pavement wore Byrd's elbows, buttocks, and left cheek down to bone. As the three men dragged Byrd, gravel became ground into his abrasions and his genitals ripped from his body. The driver swerved across the dark road, such that Byrd's body swung from left to right and wide around turns. After almost a mile and a half, the twenty-four foot chain swung him into a concrete drainage culvert, decapitating him. James Byrd. Jr. did not die until that culvert pulled his head, right arm, and shoulder from his torso. The three men continued to drag Byrd's decimated remains for another mile and a half towards town. The path of Byrd's body became written onto Huff Creek, leaving a trail of blood and flesh three miles long. King, Brewer, and Berry unhitched the chain and left James Byrd, Jr.'s body in front of an African American church.[1]

* * *

[1] *King v. State*, 29 S.W. 3d 556 (Tex. Crim. App. 2000); *Berry v. State*, Tex. 9d 8871 (Tex. App. 2001).This short summary of the crime is based on Opinion of the Court briefs filed by Judges J. Keller and Don Burgess, respectively. The documents detail the grounds for overruling appeals made by John William King and Shawn Berry. These documents provide thorough and concise summaries of the case made by the State of Texas, as well as the contentions made by the Berry and King.

In the years following the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. and the trials of his killers, two films attempted to represent Byrd's death and the town of Jasper's struggle to come to grips with that trauma. Using very different strategies of representation, each film takes a widely divergent tack in its attempt to represent the realities of the Byrd lynching for its audience. *Two Towns of Jasper,* the film from which the quote in the title comes, used extensive footage of interviews with residents in Jasper to weave a narrative about how James Byrd died and how the town understood the meaning of the crime.[2] Whitney Dow and Marco Williams screened their documentary in theatres and at festivals both before and after its national premiere on PBS on January 22, 2003. In June of that same year, the Showtime Network aired *Jasper, Texas.* The latter film, directed by Jeff Byrd (no relation), deployed dramatic recreations of the lynching and relied on a typically Hollywood treatment to tell a story about Jasper's recovery.[3]

Both *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* have value in the different techniques that they use to represent a modern day lynching on film, and help to orient James Byrd's death in America's long history of lynching. While the premise and documentary format of *Two Towns* lead to a more complex examination of the relationships between race and Byrd's death, the film suffers from its inability to visually represent the body of James Byrd. Dow and Williams rely on the memories of African Americans in order to represent the lynching, and use contradictory views about race in Jasper to encourage self-reflection in an audience. *Jasper, Texas,* on the other hand, loses

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[2] *Two Towns of Jasper*, VHS, produced and directed by Whitney Dow and Marco Williams (New York: Two Tone Productions, Inc., 2003).

[3] *Jasper, Texas*, DVD, produced by Jonathan Estrin and directed by Jeff Byrd (New York: Showtime Entertainment, 2003).

the complexity of *Two Towns*, but leads us to consider more closely the racial politics of representing a victimized African American body. The dilutions and simplifications made by Jeff Byrd make *Jasper, Texas* more accessible while retaining the shocking spectacle of a violent lynching. Because of their immensely divergent strategies, it seems important to reconcile what the two films can offer us as methods to recover from, remember, and tell about racial violence.

Using a unique and dialogic interview structure in *Two Towns*, filmmakers Whitney Dow and Marco Williams present a distinct cleavage in the opinions of black and white Jasperites regarding James Byrd's death. Dow and Williams produced their film using racially segregated film crews and subject pools in an attempt to create an honest and clear picture of racial violence in the eyes of both black and whites. *Two Towns* reveals that African Americans automatically connected Byrd's death with a history of racially inspired terror whereas most white Jasperites did not, or would not make that connection. The "gut feeling," an immediate knowledge that the crime was "race related," is voiced by African American characters, whereas white Jasperites took some time to grasp the larger meaning of Byrd's dragging.

Throughout their film, Dow and Williams resist the temptation to recreate the violence of the lynching visually. On one hand, such a strategy would make little sense for their film, but it also indicates a desire not to objectify, victimize, or fetishize an African American body. Still, using emotionally charged narration by Byrd's family members, ample details of the crime, and the benefit of the documentary's indexical relationship to a "real" subject, *Two Towns* transmits the violence and terror inflicted upon James Byrd, Jr. to the viewer. Dow and Williams illustrate strategies of familial and

local memory in regards to racism in the region while also demonstrating how James Byrd's lynching throws current structures of oppression into relief.

At the same time, *Two Towns* lacks the traumatic visual impact of a lynching, a benefit to which *Jasper, Texas* lays some claim. Director Jeff Byrd restages the terrible corporeal experience of the dragging in a way that seeks to grip an audience so that they cannot forget what happened to James Byrd, Jr. The dramatic recreation of Byrd's murder, while fundamentally insufficient in its ability to fully relate Byrd's pain, does hold the ability to shock an audience and relate some manner of the gruesome violence of Byrd's killers. Visually staging such injuries on an African American body in a spectacular manner does risk alienating an audience, not to mention re-victimizing James Byrd Jr. Nonetheless, Jeff Byrd couches his horrific spectacle in a redemptive story of self-examination and growth amongst Jasper's elite leadership. The combination of horror-film violence and feel-good racial progress creates an emotional tension that gives *Jasper, Texas* the ability to viscerally connect an audience with the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. and ensure that the terrible realities of the crime are more fully considered by the viewer.

Both *Jasper, Texas* and *Two Towns* highlight similarities between Byrd's death and lynchings that took place during the period generally attributed as the height of lynching, from 1880-1930. The history of lynching does offer precedents by which to understand the death of James Byrd Jr., a task to which this thesis turns before a closer examination of the two films. James Byrd Jr.'s death parallels a history of public and private violence. The similarities become recognizable in the techniques of the perpetrators, but also in the African American communities that lynchers meant to

terrorize. As an act of racial terrorism, the lynching of James Byrd had much the same effect amongst witnesses as did the countless spectacle and private lynchings that occurred around the turn of the twentieth century. *Two Towns* and *Jasper, Texas* both help an audience to see that African Americans' understandings of Byrd's death were closely tied to previous racial violence, further securing his murder as a lynching. Additionally, these two films remind an audience that, unlike lynch mobs in the past, the perpetrators of this crime did face punishment.

Most important in the discussion of these two films will be an understanding of historical efforts to control representations of lynchings and lynching victims, largely made by African Americans. During the early twentieth century, a variety of techniques that built on the activism of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Walter White emerged which sought to publicize truths about lynchings that were otherwise obscured by mainstream accounts. Often, anti-lynching activists sought to repossess cultural productions intended to extend the terror of lynching, most notably photographs, in order to subvert popular apologist narratives and destroy lynchings' attendant myths. In many cases, however, the only evidence produced by a lynching was the sudden absence of the victim, and African Americans developed memorial techniques to secure evidence of racial violence outside of mainstream media channels. Keeping in mind the various attempts by African Americans to portray Black subjectivity while recovering clouded truths about the dark practice of lynching helps one to consider the issues of representation the films about Jasper, Texas raise and work upon.

In the immediate aftermath of Byrd's dragging, written representations of that crime were imperfect and its impact unevenly understood; fissures which have the

potential to widen further with time. While the lynching shocked many, its magnitude and historical significance were not so uniformly felt, even as news of the crime achieved national attention. Press coverage, while extensive, varied greatly in tone, language, and disclosure of detail. In the years following the trials of Byrd's killers several attempts were made to produce a comprehensive account of the lynching, including two books written by journalists and one by a psychologist. The books raise some of the same issues of race, memory, trauma, and spectacle that *Two Towns* and *Jasper, Texas* touch on, and do so with varying degrees of success. While these written accounts certainly deepen our knowledge of the event, and inform much of this project, their varied and conflicting narratives make them impractical for any unified mass dissemination. In contrast, both films offer a chance to fix the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. in the memories of a mass audience far removed from the actual events of June 7, 1998, both temporally and spatially. While one can and should argue at length about the veracity and efficacy of film as a historical document, *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* illustrate some ways that filmmakers can effectively represent the violence of a particular historical moment. While both films stoop to some level of sensationalism they argue for the importance of James Byrd, Jr., attempt to represent a horrific murder, and make clear the continual occurrence of lynching in the United States. In doing so, both films have antecedents in the history of African American visual culture and anti-lynching struggles. Understanding the representations created by Whitney Dow, Marco Williams, and Jeff Byrd, as well as the historical antecedents for visual representations of racial violence help us understand the nature of the lynching as well as imagine more effective ways to represent traumatic subjects.

In *Long Dark Road*, psychologist Ricardo Ainslie seeks to understand Bill King's racism and what might cause someone to commit such an act of brutality. Ainslie writes of James Byrd's lynching:

> One could conjure scenarios that might render lethal acts comprehensible (say moments of passion, or an attempt to cover one's tracks by leaving no witnesses) but the specific character of this murder defied such attempts at understanding or rationalization.[4]

While it would be impossible to ever rationalize the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. it does seem possible to come to a better understanding of the crime's specifics, the traumatic repercussions, and how people remembered the murder. *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* offer all those possibilities, and at the least broadens our sense of how films can aid in that understanding. With every year that passes since the lynching of James Byrd, Jr., the nature of his death recedes further and further from our collective memory. Close examination of these two films provides a mechanism by which to reconsider Byrd's death and secure it in our consciousness.

* * *

Early on June 7, 1998, Jasper County Police responded to what they believed to be a hit-and-and run accident after a body was spotted between a church and cemetery.[5] Jasper Sheriff Billy Rowles, on his way towards Houston for a golf tournament, turned his truck around and headed for the crime scene at about 9:00 A.M. Details soon

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[4] Ricardo C. Ainslie, *Long Dark Road: Bill King and Murder in Jasper, Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 6. Ainslie resists attempts to paint King as "monster" or "other," in the interest of showing that his racism is not that unusual in America and for that reason more frightening.

[5] Accounts differ as to whether or not killers placed Byrd's body closer to Rose Bloom Baptist Church or an adjacent cemetery.

disproved theories of a hit-and-run, including the careful arrangement of Byrd's body, the long trail of flesh and blood, and Byrd's detached head and arm. A crowd, largely African American, had already joined the police and looked on from the other side of yellow tape.[6] As evidence piled up between the location of the beating and Byrd's body, the severity of the crime became quickly apparent, and made the case ever easier to solve. Once young Steven Scott volunteered having seen Mr. Byrd in a light color, step-side pick-up truck, the police found an occasion to bring Sean Berry in for questioning, and he subsequently implicated Bill King and Russell Brewer. In only a few days, Berry, King, and Brewer had been officially charged with Byrd's murder.[7]

In the days following the death of James Byrd, Jr., tiny Jasper, Texas came to feel the bright spotlights of the national media. High profile politicians and activists began to speak publicly about the crime, as well as visit Jasper. President Bill Clinton called the Byrd household to offer his condolences. The Dallas NAACP publicly reconsidered its regular opposition to capital punishment.[8] At Byrd's funeral, heavily attended by politicians and national civil rights leaders, Reverend Jesse Jackson stressed the impact of the high-profile murder by stating that, "no one has captured the nation's attention like this tragedy."[9] While Jackson's remarks might reflect the heat of the moment, they do

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[6] Dina Temple-Ralston, *A Death in Texas: A Story of Race, Murder, and a Small Town's Struggle for Redemption* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 4-7.
[7] Carol Marie Cropper, "Black Man Fatally Dragged In a Possible Racial Killing," *New York Times*, June 10, 1998, sec. A:16; Bob Hoehler, "Brutal Slaying Tears at Texas Town," *Boston Globe*, June12, 1998, sec. A: 1.
[8] David Firestone, "A Life Marked by Troubles, but Not by Hatred," *New York Times*, June 13, 1998, sec. A: 6; Bob Hoehler, "Blacks in Jasper Cry for Justice; Many Back Death Penalty," *Boston Globe*, June 13, 1998, sec. A: 1.
[9] Quoted. in, David Firestone, "Speakers Stress Racial Healing at Service for Dragging Victim," *New York Times*, June 14, 1998, sec. I: 20.

provide some insight as to the level to which Byrd's murder penetrated the national consciousness.[10]

Through a cursory survey of the press coverage surrounding Byrd's murder and the trials of the killers, certain themes emerge that give a good impression of efforts to both describe and make sense of the crime. Initially, newspapers sought to make an account of James Byrd, Jr.'s life, painting him as a tragic, if troubled, figure. Many accounts acknowledged that Byrd, 49 years old at the time of his death, "never seemed to have made full use of a broad intelligence and renowned musical ability."[11] Journalists often mentioned Byrd's "history as a small time criminal," which included jail time for theft, forgery, public intoxication, and possession of drug paraphernalia.[12] News sources also acknowledged that Byrd had recently moved into his own apartment in a public housing program, repaired relationships with his large family, and had made strides to

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[10] Several events might be seen as evidence of the impact the Byrd lynching had on national discourse about race. Politicians in Washington and elsewhere immediately used Byrd's death as an example to call for stronger hate crime laws. See Steve Lash, "Proposal Made to Broaden Law on Hate Crimes," *Houston Chronicle*, June 17, 1998, sec. A1; Rick Lyman, "Hate Laws Don't matter, Except When They Do," *New York Times*, October 18, 1998, sec. WK6; Eunice Mososco, "Senators Hear a Daughter's Pain," *Austin American-Statesman*, July 9, 1998, sec. A1. The media frenzy surrounding Byrd's death was such that various groups sought to capitalize on the spotlight. Texas klaverns of the KKK and a Dallas branch of the New Black Panther Party staged simultaneous rallies in Jasper in order to publicize their specific agendas. See Rick Bragg, "For Jasper, Just What It Didn't Want," *New York Times*, June 27, 1998, sec A8; "In Wake of Texas Killing, Black Militants and Klan Trade Words, Not Blows," *New York Times*, June 28, 1998, sec. I17. The crime was so well known that it became a sort of shorthand for racism or racial violence. In September of 1998, firefighters in a New York City parade were caught on tape in racist costumes mocking the dragging and subsequently dismissed. See *New York Times* "A Sick Tradition", September 14, 1998, sec. A32; Donna De la Cruz, "Two Firefighters Suspended for their Part in Racist Float," The Associated Press, September 12, 1998. Of all the changes or trends linked to the lynching of James Byrd, Jr., the most disturbing were copycat crimes that surfaced in both Louisiana and Illinois: *New York Times*, "A Third Car-Dragging Incident is Reported," June 15, 1998, sec A14.

[11] Firestone, "A Life Marked By Troubles, But Not Hatred." Also included in this account are details of Byrd's family. Byrd had seven sisters and one brother, and while geographically dispersed, they remained close as a family. Religion was an important part of Byrd family life, and James, Jr. had made attempts to return to the church where his father was a deacon. Stella Byrd and James, Sr. worked as a Sunday school teacher and dry cleaner, respectively.

[12] Denise Gamino, "Victim's Family Recalls His Talents and Troubles," *Austin American-Statesman*, June 12, 1998, sec. A1.

become more self-sufficient.[13] The general picture of Byrd that emerges is one of a gentle yet drifting man; well-liked around town and a common sight walking the streets of Jasper even late at night.

As evidence mounted against the killers and gained notice in the press, it became clear that Byrd's death was not the result of a random act. Rather, the three killers shared similar feelings of racial hatred and planned a violent action to express their white supremacist convictions. Given the high-profile nature of the crime, and the issues of race involved, it is worth noting the language used to describe the crime. Naming Byrd's murder as a "lynching" directly links his death to the long tradition of ritual murders in the South, in a way the phrases such as "hate crime," "racial killing," or simply "dragging" do not. While an in-depth investigation of the language used by the press to describe Byrd's murder remains beyond the scope of this particular project, instances when the crime *was* referred to as a lynching merit some reflection.

The notoriety of Byrd's murder spurred much discussion of hate crime statutes and race relations.[14] Yet, use of the word "lynching" by the press surfaced with less frequency, and only then with great care. Two editorials in the *New York Times* explicitly aligned the murder with lynching, calling Byrd's death a "lynching by pickup truck."[15] More rarely, journalists used the word "lynching" as an allegory for Byrd's murder. Despite these instances, some people in Texas seemed aware of the crime's lynching status. "Blacks [in Jasper] were less certain that the slaying was an isolated incident," and

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[13] Firestone, "A Life Marked by Troubles."
[14] See n. 10.
[15] *New York Times,* "Race, Memory, and Justice," June 14, 1998, sec. WK: 14. Also see, Brent Staples, "Jasper, Tex., and the Ghosts of Lynchings Past," *New York Times*, February 25, 1999, sec. A: 26.

the prosecution described the killers' actions in vivid lynching imagery: "Instead of a rope, they used a chain; instead of horses, there was a pickup truck."[16]

What seems interesting here is the unwillingness for people from Jasper to use the word "lynch" despite the fact that they seem to understand Byrd's murder in a similar manner. Clearly, "lynching" carries such weight that people are reluctant to use the word, especially in Jasper where fears of retribution persist. In some ways, it seems a reluctance to use the word "lynching" in regards to Byrd's murder indicates a gap in representation on the part of national press. While reporters understood the pain and fear felt by African Americans in Jasper, they only aligned the murder with past lynchings awkwardly, if at all. The films examined here reflect an understanding of the act as more than just a murder, but share a similar a reluctance to name the killing as a lynching.[17] Nonetheless, both films illustrate connections between Byrd's lynching and a longer history of racial violence more explicitly than the press coverage surrounding the crime. *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* both raise questions as to why Jasperites and others adopt the language of lynching only reluctantly, while also seeking to visually represent the murder as a lynching.

As the first trial approached, the press attempted to make sense of the crime by representing the motivations and backgrounds of Berry, King, and Brewer through 1999. The three murderers largely became portrayed as products of a youth spent in the penal system, and somehow different than any other white resident of East Texas. Through indictments, jury selections, and trials, press representations focused on the killers'

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[16] Carol Marie Cropper, "Town Expresses Sadness and Horror Over Slaying," *New York Times*, June 11, 1998, sec. A: 16; Lyman, "Man Guilty in Texas Dragging Death."

[17] As indicated above, in sources cited in footnote nine, part of the reluctance to name Byrd's murder as a lynching had to do with shifting vocabularies about "hate crimes." Whether or not this change in language entails an active denial requires further examination.

racism. Most shocking were Bill King's possession of "hand-written notes, racist drawings and a membership application, constitution, bylaws, and code of ethics for a hate group [he] allegedly planned to form....The Texas Rebel Soldiers of the Confederate Knights of America, was to be formed in Jasper."[18] Media also paid special attention to King's and Brewer's tattoos, including "Nazi and racist prison gang insignia, Ku Klux Klan symbols, and the figure of a lynched black man."[19] Shawn Berry posed a special problem for these sorts of representations because he had not spent extensive time in prison and lived his entire life in Jasper.[20] After Byrd's murder, Berry became someone "of whom people speak well even as they shake their heads," while Bill King became "abandoned by Jasper."[21]

As part of the prosecution's case against King, Brewer, and Berry, District Attorney Guy James Gray had his team focus on the injuries to James Byrd Jr. as he was dragged down Huff Creek Road. Mainstream newspapers echoed this focus to some extent, largely without the use of visual evidence. Some details of Byrd's injuries made their way into the papers, supported by testimony by Jasper Sheriff Billy Rowles.[22]

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[18] Patty Reinart, "Byrd's Slaying Called the Basis for Hate Group," *Houston Chronicle*, February 17, 1999, sec. A: 1; Also, Rick Lyman. "Dragging Death is Called Signal for Racist Plan," *New York Times*, February 17, 1999, sec. A:1.

[19] Patty Reinart, "King's Ex-girlfriend testifies in Jasper Trial," *Houston Chronicle*, February 18, 1999, sec. A: 1; See also, "Defendant Said to Urge Race Killing," *Boston Globe*, February 19, 1999, sec. A: 10. Evidence of racism formed an important support for the case against the three killers, and certainly deserved the attention it got in the mainstream press. It seems possible however, that such representations in some ways lessened the town of Jasper's sense of culpability for producing a violently racist mindset. By extension, other communities could look past their own problems and blame visible, organized hate groups while neglecting the kinds of institutional and everyday racism that often goes unmarked.

[20] Also noted was the possibility that Shawn Berry and James Byrd knew each other through a shared parole officer, for as long as two years.

[21] Rick Bragg, "Unfathomable Crime, Unlikely Figure," *New York Times*, 17 June 1998, sec A: 12.

[22] *Boston Globe*, "Sheriff Tells Jury of Scene at Dragging Death," February 17, 1998, sec. A: 8; *Boston Globe,* "Dragging Victim's Suffering Cited; Texas Jury Hears from Pathologist," February 23, 1998, sec. A: 6; *New York Times* "Painful Killing Described as Trial Nears Its End," February 23, 1999. Descriptions of the notebooks can also be found in the opinion of the court brief written by Burgess: "State's Exhibit 1 is a bound booklet containing fourteen photos of Byrd....The photos are in color, eight inches by ten inches in

During the King trial, pathologist Tommy Brown recounted Byrd's injuries in great detail, describing Byrd's efforts to keep his head off the asphalt. Much of this testimony served to make the case that Byrd was alive when chained to Berry's truck, thus making his murder also a kidnapping and a capital crime. During the trial, jurors were given individual notebooks containing fourteen color photographs of Byrd's body at the crime scene and autopsy details. It seems important that actual pictures of Byrd's body were confined to the view of the jurors, but the state's use of the photographs did not escape commentary by the press. Another important demonstration adopted by the prosecution was that of a "videotape of the road the pickup traveled, illustrating the length of the trip and showing every inch of what Mr. Byrd was dragged across."[23] Played for the entire courtroom, the video asks the viewer to imagine what Byrd must have felt, and forced the jurors to connect the photos of Byrd's body with the road on screen.[24] The gruesome impact and emotional toll of recounting Byrd's injuries were not lost on either the state's lawyers or the press. *Two Towns* and *Jasper, Texas* try to relate the horror of that violence in different ways, and the strategies they employ in its representation largely determine how an audience understands James Byrd's death.

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size, and depict the body as found as well as close-ups of the wounds. The body as photographed had not been altered in any way that might have enhanced its gruesomeness." See n.1, *Berry v. State.*

[23] Rick Lyman, "Man Guilty of Murder in Dragging Death," *The New York Times*, February 24, 1998, sec. A: 1. Temple-Raston states in *A Death in Texas* (200) that the tape lasted eleven minutes, and was filmed in complete silence.

[24] Joyce King, *Hate Crime: The Story of a Dragging in Jasper, Texas*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 2002). King writes of reluctantly viewing the binders of photographs at the DA's office after a day's session in court. King, an African American woman, is fearful to actually view the photographs and yet feels a strong need to look at the pictures. Viewing the autopsy photographs serve to increase hear unbearable empathy as well as her understanding of the violence. (Ibid., p 64-65, 120-127).

One reason that the Byrd lynching stands out as especially important is that it closely reflects aspects of two broad historical categories of lynching practiced in the United States: spectacle and private lynchings. The phenomenon commonly referred to as spectacle lynching constitutes the most well-known form of lynching violence - both for its cultural pervasiveness and for the artifacts intended to extend its effects. In Grace Hale's astute summation, "lynching spectacles evolved a well-known structure, a sequence and pace of events that southerners came to understand as standard."[25] The steps that mobs took included but were by no means limited to: a chase or capture from incarceration, mutilation and castration of the victim, torture and confession followed by a slow burning or hanging, and the collection of souvenirs from the body of the victim by those in attendance. Even while lynchings in such a carnival atmosphere were far less common than private lynching, the sequence and specificity of action became known through commodification of the events. Public announcements prior to lynchings during the early twentieth century heightened terror for African Americans, while recruiting ever larger numbers of spectators. Even while African Americans rarely attended the spectacles, the practices managed to fix themselves in both white and black cultural memory.[26] Hale states that, "spectacle lynchings were about making racial difference in the new South, about ensuring the separation of all southern life into whiteness and blackness."[27] That separation was written upon the bodies of African Americans.

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[25] Grace Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), 203.

[26] "Lynchings of all kinds became fixed in southerners' as well as non-southerners' imagination as the dominant form of southern white violence against blacks. And certainly news of midnight shootings and hangings by small groups of white men circulated among both white and black southerners even when not reported in local papers." (Ibid., 204).

[27] Ibid., 203.

Grace Hale also aptly summarizes the ways in which spectacle lynchings produced a wave of material that extended the terror of the mob:

> The Spectacle circulated in detailed written accounts of tortures, pickled and dried body parts, a radio announcement, an Edison recording, a film, and even a gruesome picture postcard sent and saved: these artifacts increasingly did the cultural work of othering southern African Americans, of making whiteness across gender and class lines, for them...[in] the modern twentieth century lynching had become the white South's own ritual of transgression and by the late 1930's representations of lynchings worked almost as well as lynchings themselves.[28]

For lynching supporters and supremacists, the photographs and accounts of torture brought the spectacle into the home, and allowed them to actively remember their experience. For African Americans, those same artifacts served as a warning, and a threat, while continuing the objectification of the victim. In a sense, those cultural productions have become repositories of memory and the evidence by which many people come to know of lynching. While the three killers lynched Byrd in private, evidence of his death soon became public. The three killers meant for James Byrd Jr.'s carefully placed corpse to serve the same purpose as countless other bodies left suspended from tree limbs, or body parts displayed in store windows.[29]

Jasper and its surrounding counties were not without their own history of public lynchings. The photographic record reveals numerous spectacle lynchings that took place in nearby towns, including an especially large mob in Paris, Texas that hung Henry Smith

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[28] Ibid., 227.

[29] Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, (New York: Random House, 2002). Dray recounts the experience of W.E.B. Du Bois on his way to meet with Joel Chandler Harris in Atlanta in 1899. On his way, Du Bois learned that the knuckles of recently lynched Sam Hose were for sale in a local store window. Distraught, Du Bois never made it to his meeting and later wrote of the incident as an epiphany about the status of African Americans in the United States. (Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 14-16).

from a scaffold emblazoned with the single word, "JUSTICE," in 1893.[30] While the brutality of these incidents speaks for itself, they become more important here because they inform the memories and thinking of adult Jasperites interpreting the Byrd lynching. Diane Temple-Raston points to an incident in Beaumont, Texas in June of 1943 when a white woman accused a black man of rape. Two thousand white dockworkers erupted into a race riot, causing two deaths and countless injuries. Sheriff Billy Rowles grew up in Beaumont and remembered his father's stories of the late night lynching of a black victim during the uproar.[31] As recently as the 1993, in the nearby town of Vidor, the Ku Klux Klan very publicly intimidated a small population of African Americans, so as to prevent integration of a public housing unit.[32]

Also worthy of consideration in light of James Byrd, Jr.'s death is an equally devastating record of lynchings conducted in private. These killings claimed many more lives and yet left absence and silence as their only evidence. In his survey of lynching in Georgia and Virginia, historian W. Fitzhugh Brundage categorizes lynchings by the size of the mobs that perpetrated the murders; a good deal of his discussion centers on private

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[30] Hale interprets this 1893 lynching as the first full combination of modern technologies (railroad, photography, mass printing, and retelling) into a spectacle lynching. Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 207. Dray narrates the modification of a "cotton float," a platform normally used for moving cotton in preparation for the lynching. After the mob tortured and mutilated Smith, "the barely conscious Smith and the entire platform were soaked in oil and set on fire, and the flames rose up above the prairie in a fierce ball, JUSTICE faintly discernible in the inferno....Paris had succeeded in mounting a more dramatic spectacle than Texarkana's; indeed, amply covered by the press and photographed, it became one of the most talked about spectacle lynchings of the day." Dray, *Persons Unknown*, 78.

[31] Temple-Raston, A *Death in Texas* 89. In *Long Dark Road*, Ainslie writes that "[Guy James] Gray liked to repeat a story that he had heard his father tell countless times about a lynching in neighboring Newton County that had taken place in 1933." (133). Rowles and Gray seem to be outliers amongst the white population, and the only whites who possess memories of racial violence, or will reveal those memories to others. *Two Towns of Jasper* reinforces that impression.

[32] Bragg, "Unfathomable Crime, Unlikely Figure." A Vidor klavern also attended the rally in Jasper after Byrd's funeral.

mobs that consisted of fewer than five participants.[33] Private lynch mobs "stalked their victims under the cover of night and carried out their violent punishments with little if any conspicuous ritual... [conducting] abductions and whippings on isolated byways."[34] The involvement of Ku Klux Klan units in secretive night-time lynchings was common, and Edward Ayers points to the violent activity of such "Brotherhoods" in mountainous regions where blacks did not live in large numbers and were easily susceptible to roaming private lynch mobs.[35] African Americans unknown within a community or otherwise marginalized were even more vulnerable. Hale states that often:

> [S]mall groups of white men hunted down and shot or hanged their African American victims after an argument over the year end sharecroppers' settle or to send a message to other timber or turpentine camp laborers not to demand any better. These lynchings in the night claimed many more victims than the open air spectacles of torture that drew such large crowds.[36]

Often these small groups acted without any provocation other than their own prejudice, "resort[ing] to an improvised lynching in order to give their private grievances a patina of legitimacy that would have been absent had they simply murdered their victims in their jail cells or homes."[37] The threat of nighttime abductions or stories from those lucky enough to survive this secretive violence also has served to create an environment of fear and intimidation.

Because the history of private lynchings produces a less visible kind of evidence, one must consider how those acts have still come to exert the same power on memory and knowledge as spectacle lynchings. In his study of lynching memory among African

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[33] W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Lynching in the New South: Georgia and Virginia, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 28.
[34] Ibid., 22.
[35] Edward Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice: Crime and Punishment in the 19th Century American South*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 260.
[36] Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 201.
[37] Brundage, *Lynching in the New South,* 33.

Americans in Laurens, South Carolina, Bruce Baker provides some insight into how knowledge of discrete violence becomes passed through a community without ever surfacing in mainstream channels. Baker found that because it was unsafe for African Americans to voice knowledge of lynchings in the early twentieth century, those memories could only be maintained in private discourse. When these accounts were not allowed expression in public form, such as photographs in newspapers, the stories of lynchings were maintained by talk – within communities and especially within families. Baker asserts that,

> the various memories and silences about specific lynchings in Laurens County reveal some general patterns about the way lynching becomes part of a community's historical memory. Briefly, they are these: memories of lynchings are attached primarily to the families of the victims, lynching victims are more likely to be remembered as part of a genealogical landscape, memories of lynching have a socializing function, and memories of lynching act as covert evidence in private discourse of wrongs that cannot be corrected in the public discourse.[38]

Important to remember here are Baker's points that the maintenance of these private histories occurs apart from the knowledge of a white mainstream memory, and becomes bound to familial and physical landscapes.[39]

In the wake of the Byrd lynching, information about some of the more secretive acts of racial violence throughout the region seeped to the surface. In the 1920's, for example, a vigilante group named the Black Cat Society operated in Jasper.[40] Active mostly at night, the group's members rode automobiles down back roads clubbing

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[38] Bruce Baker, "Under the Rope: Lynching and Memory in Laurens, South Carolina," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000.) p 334.

[39] Baker relies on folklorist Barbara Allen's ideas about the intertwining of physical place and familial relationships. Writes Baker: "The nexus of genealogy and geography provides an anchor for memory." Baker, "Under the Rope," 335.

[40] Temple-Raston, *A Death in Texas*, 40.

African American men with baseball bats. Temple-Raston also cites "nigger knocking" as a favorite pastime of racist white organizations at the time. In a manner frighteningly similar to Byrd's lynching, assailants would offer rides to black men walking alone and then beat them. Another suspected lynching under cover of darkness purportedly occurred in neighboring Newton County in 1977. Ray Peacock, a black man, was run over by a white teenager. Local African American oral histories suggest that Peacock had been lured out in the open in a desire for some manner of retribution, although the teenager at fault claimed it had been an accident. Rumors within the black community linked Peacock romantically with the Sheriff's daughter and maintained that the corpse's genitals had been removed. Regardless, little investigation was made and the teenager escaped any punishment. A few years later, another African American man's body was found tied and drowned.[41] In the weeks after Byrd's death the parents of a young man whose hanging had been questionably ruled a suicide in 1989 sought help in reopening their son's file.[42] These few cases, which made it into print only after Byrd's high profile lynching occurred potentially indicate a consistent pattern of racial violence that appeared organized, however discrete.

In his recent discussion of lynching as a metaphor, Jonathon Markovitz looks in part towards Michael Omi and Howard Winant's notions of "racial formation" in determining the ultimate meanings of lynching.[43] Omi and Winant trace "the socio-historical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and

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[41] Ibid., 64-67.
[42] Peter Noel, "A Question of Murder," *Village Voice*, August 4, 1998, 28.
[43] Jonathan Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching: Racial Violence and Memory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

destroyed."[44] Markovitz positions lynchings as violent and absolute "racial projects," the interpersonal or societal actions which inform everyday understandings of race.[45] Racial projects generally include broad acts such as affirmative action rulings or immigration laws, but they also take the form of smaller scale events. Lynching qualifies as a racial project in that a lynch mob employs symbolic, corporeal violence in order to enforce some notion of social code or imagined racial hierarchy.[46] The pain, terror, and void left in Jasper's African American community after June 7, 1998 differ little from the absence and fear present in the wake of any lynching in the century before.

The very manner in which Byrd's lynching straddles categories of public spectacle and private violence highlights the ultimate effect of such symbolic violence. During the King trial, gang specialist William Knox testified that, "there [were] plenty of places here to hide a body and leave it undiscovered for a long period of time. In this case, it was a public place. This was designed to strike terror in the community."[47] The spectacular discovery of Byrd's remains, and the manner in which he was killed, extended the violence across the entire African American community, inspiring fear as well as a sense of loss. Years of violent acts designed to remind African Americans of their vulnerability certainly resonated as Byrd's lynching was discovered and arrests were made. Long memories of victimhood persisted within the African American community and spurred rumors about the crime. African Americans wondered if it was revenge for a

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[44] Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 55.

[45] "A racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation, or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized based upon that meaning." Ibid., 56.

[46] The historic refusal to punish lynch mobs, even when witnesses could identify perpetrators, further illustrated the place of African Americans in the eyes of the state, and suggested the futility of speaking out.

[47] "Dragging Victim's Blood Cited in Suspect's Home," *Boston Globe*, February 20, 1999, sec. A:5.

recent black-on-white murder.[48] Christine Carter stated, "I was scared to walk outside after that [Byrd's lynching]...We were all worried that this was the beginning of something bigger. We were all waiting for something even worse to happen."[49] Unav Wade, an African American salon owner, remembered being quite frightened by the news.[50] In contrast, KJAS Radio reporter Mike Lout, a white man, found the news of an African American body on Huff Creek Road unremarkable, thinking the initial reports to be mere exaggeration. In the wake of Byrd's death, fear and rumor eventually gave way to introspection and reflection as Jasper sought to come to grips with the realities of what had happened. Part of that process has to do with how people understand and represent the trauma of Byrd's lynching, a discursive field which *Jasper, Texas* and *Two Towns* attempt to enter.

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While one might never satisfactorally explain the death of James Byrd, Jr., or perhaps fully understand it, for a portion of Jasper's citizenry, aspects of Bill King's violence could not be *mis*understood. Like lynchings of old, Byrd's murder meant fear and intimidation for the very African Americans at which King, Berry, and Brewer aimed. How then, might one seek to make those understandings available to a broader segment of the population (racially, geographically, and temporally), while further investigating the meanings of racial violence in general? As some attempted to reduce the

[48] On May 22,1998, Jerry McQueen, a wealthy white man was murdered by an employee after a disagreement. The case was over money, and rather straightforward when Donald Kennedy confessed. Said Mike Lout: "we have murders and shootings in this town all the time, but they are never whodunits. In Texas people say, 'Hell, yes, I shot him. I should have done it ten years ago.' They don't weasel around." Temple-Raston, *A Death in Texas,* 25.
[49] Ibid., 110.
[50] Ibid., 17.

significance of Byrd's death by representing it as something other than a lynching, even as less than a murder, how might African Americans find ways to combat those representations? Before turning towards the two films that consider James Byrd's lynching, it is worthwhile to reflect upon strategies of representation relied upon by anti-lynching activists at the beginning of the twentieth century.

During the height of lynching, generally considered to be 1880 through 1930, anti-lynching lobbyists, artists, and thinkers made explicit attempts to encourage the general public to examine lynching violence in a more complete manner. While different actors, motives, and victims could enter into these accounts of lynching, activists generally sought to highlight the sensational brutality of the lynching. Perhaps the most famous anti-lynching writer, Ida B. Wells-Barnett traveled extensively to speak in support of anti-lynching legislation, and published critical pieces in pamphlets and newspapers. Working before photographs became an easily reproduced and accepted aspect of journalistic evidence, Wells-Barnett used language to vividly portray the sadistic torture and murder of countless lynching victims.[51] Often, Wells-Barnett reproduced accounts of lynchings taken from white newspapers in order to highlight the casualness with which the Southern press regarded racial violence, thus making its vulgarity more pronounced. Wells-Barnett also used newspaper accounts to actively deconstruct excuses made by lynching apologists. Most notorious among these myths was the idea black men routinely raped white women, which lynch mobs floated even when there was no evidence of contact between black men and white women. In 1892 Wells-Barnett wrote:

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[51]Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "A Red Record" (1894), reprinted in *On Lynchings*, (New York: Arno Press, 1969) 25-100.

> Nobody in this section of the country believes the old thread-bare lie that Negro men rape white women. If Southern white men are not careful they will over-reach themselves, and public sentiment will have a reaction; and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.[52]

In one rhetorical move, Wells-Barnett refused the "lie" of the black rapist, implicated white women for their complicity in the lynching drama, and hinted at white male violence towards African American women.

NAACP Secretary Walter White also strove to disrupt the myths surrounding lynching, and in *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch*, he adopted some of the same rhetorical strategies as Wells-Barnett.[53] White worked with a broad interpretation of lynching, and saw his compilation of statistics and accounts as one weapon in his fight to ensure passage of federal Anti-Lynching Laws. White felt that by 1929 the act of lynching had been prevalent enough that its nature and meaning were widely secured, and any violence that engendered the same feeling of threat and terror might be understood in a similar way. In his autobiography, White details his own escape from violence and the terror it inspired in him as he investigated a lynching in Arkansas in 1919.[54] The often calm, factual discussions of *Rope and Faggot* were intended to complement other strategies of representation pursued by White in other media both written and visual. Walter White also saw value in playing upon the violent spectacle of lynching in a sensational way, and deployed those tactics in *The Crisis*, anti-lynching flyers, and elsewhere.

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[52] Wells-Barnett, escerpted in "Southern Horrors" (1892), *On Lynchings*, 4.
[53] Walter White, *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (Salem, New Hampshire: Ayer Company, 1992), originally published in 1929.
[54] Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), p 47-51.

When Walter White and other anti-lynching activists managed to obtain a photograph or account of a lynching they often sought to make them more widely accessible, in an attempt to turn its dark cultural work on its head. By including images of lynching violence in anti-lynching flyers or in *The Crisis*, White pointed to the brutality of the act, focusing special attention on the mobs surrounding the victims. One NAACP anti-lynching fundraising flyer in particular captures this tragedy especially well. The text added to a photograph of the 1935 Florida lynching of Rubin Stacy read:

> Do not look at the Negro. His earthly problems are ended. Instead, look at the seven WHITE children who gaze at this gruesome spectacle. Is it horror or gloating on the face of the neatly dressed seven-year-old girl on the right?... Rubin Stacy, the Negro, who was lynched at Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on July 19, 1935, for 'threatening and frightening a white woman,' suffered PHYSICAL torture for a few short hours. But what psychological havoc is being wrought in the minds of the white children?...[55]

One should ask whether it is possible to *not* look at the lynching victim. It must be considered whether reprinting the pictures in a new context can really give them new meaning or restore any dignity to the victims.[56]

Initially, photographs of lynching victims served as the toys and tools of White Supremacist thought, extending the spectacle for whites in popular print culture and further enforcing terror among blacks. The photographs of spectacle lynchings recorded the deed and served as a souvenir.[57] Photographers further violated victims' bodies with a

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[55] Dora Apel, *Imagery of Lynching: Black Men, White Women, and the Mob* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 40-41.

[56] Marcus Wood, Blind Memory: *Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865* (New York: Routledge, 2000.) Wood discusses problems with representing torture as part of anti-slavery initiatives, that might be seen as antecedents to these very issues in his chapter, "Representing Pain and Describing Torture: Slavery, Punishment and Martyrology."

[57] "Indeed, the photographic art played as significant a role in the ritual as torture or souvenir grabbing – creating a sort of two-dimensional biblical sinew, a receptacle for a collective sinful self. Lust propelled the commercial reproduction and distribution of the images, facilitating the endless replay of anguish. Even dead, the victims were without sanctuary." James Allen, "Afterword," *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America*, ed. James Allen (Santa Fe: Twin Palms Publishers, 2000) 205.

photographic gaze, thus implicating themselves in the violence. Furthermore, by adopting the subjective gaze of the photographer, viewers become summarily implicated in that violence; part of the mob around the victim. Reprinting these photos recreates the subjugating gaze which originally held the victims, and might be seen as reproducing the objectifying and violent treatment of their bodies in a similar way.[58]

Despite their assumed attachment to an actual historical referent, photographs should not be considered as the most complete way in which to impart information. More than photographs, the plastic arts have the potential to impart vast amounts of historical knowledge, as well as the feelings of the artist, in a persuasive way that photographs can never achieve. As representations of lynchings, photographs fail in several key ways. Because the majority of lynching photographs are taken after the victim's death, it becomes difficult to extract the victim's experience, beyond knowing that terror and pain surely reigned. Largely absent from photographs of lynchings are the secret abductions, night raids, and ritualistic violence that, by design, did not achieve mass circulation. Also absent are the fear, grief, and strength of African American families in the wake of public and private lynching. Painters, sculptors, and other artists have managed to build upon the promise of photography to include those aspects hidden from the camera's lens as well as add an element of subjectivity.[59]

Among the first activists to mobilize the potential of partially fictional visual representation in the early twentieth century was Walter White. A major aspect of White's and the NAACP's activity in fighting lynching in the first decades of the

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[58] Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 8-15, 20-26.
[59] Helen Langa, "Two Anti-Lynching Art Exhibitions: Politicized Viewpoints, Racial Perspectives, Gendered Constraints," *American Art* 13 (Spring 1999): 10-39.; Apel, "The Evolution of Lynching Narratives in Contemporary Art," in *Imagery of Lynching.*; c.f. *Witnessing Lynching: American Writers Respond*, ed. Anne P. Rice (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003).

twentieth century was pushing for the support of various federal Anti-Lynching bills, designed to protect African Americans as well as punish perpetrators. As the 1934 lynching of Claude Neal precipitated debate over the newly proposed Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill, White sought to influence its passage in a new way. First, White sought support form prominent white liberals. He wrote to his friend Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney seeking endorsement and patronage for his project:

> Even a morbid subject can be made popular if a sufficiently distinguished list of patronesses will sponsor the exhibit and the right kind of publicity can be secured for it...I fear that I have put this somewhat crudely and inadequately but I trust that you will be able to understand how I am trying to delicately affect a union of art and propaganda.[60]

White feared seeming ungracious in his request for funds, but his interest in framing the *right* kind of message in the *right* way is clear. White insisted on securing works that portrayed the gruesome realities of lynching but retained a high aesthetic value, without resorting to sensationalism. Part of this desire came from a fear that some imagery might normalize the vulgarity inherent in the lynching act. White's intended target was the "liberal white viewer who might lightly pass over a report of a lynching while sipping his or her morning coffee."[61] To do so, the artwork needed to avoid the opposing extremes of sensational realism and detached aestheticism. White sought a balance between the criminality of the lynching crowd and the recovery of black pain and subjectivity.[62] White was overtly concerned about putting together a strong art show as well as a political piece, cognizant of the potential for other forms of art to shape statements in

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[60] Quoted in Marlene Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s," *Prospects* 18 (1993), 326.
[61] Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 88.
[62] To this end, the NAACP show did not include photographs, nor works that explicitly critiqued the government. It also neglected issues of interracial sex and desire that under girded the reasons that lynching occurred.

creative ways that photography cannot. In contrast to lynching photographs, many works at the 1935 shows focused on the black body as intact, even heroic, while showing the white mob to be vile and predatory.

Walter White's show, "An Art Commentary on Lynching" opened at the Arthur U. Newton Galleries in New York on February 15, 1935. As much as White's show sought to dance a line between violent realism and pleasing aesthetics, some found the over all impact of the show to be too much. One woman fainted at the opening night, and *Art News* objected to the works' macabre sensationalism.[63] *News Week in the Arts*, however, gave positive marks to the entire show, and at the very least seconded White's original intention: "the artists have depicted brutality in its most sickening form. Critics agreed no spoken or written argument against lynch law could be as hard hitting as this visual articulation."[64] While political differences motivated criticism from a competing show backed by the John Reed Club, all agreed upon the usefulness of creative visual representation. Stephen Alexander wrote in *New Masses* of the John Reed Club's show: "In order to fight effectively against the oppression of the Negro, it is not enough merely to arouse indignation or sympathy or horror. We must also explain lynching graphically and plastically."[65]

Of course, the plastic arts are quite different from photography and motion pictures. In some ways, the development of film technology and technique represents the desire to harness the documentary and archival properties of stop motion photography

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[63] Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 92; Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching," 329.
[64] Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching" 330.
[65] Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching," 343. Alexander's critique of 'sympathy or horror' could be read more as a dig at the NAACP's religious focus and refusal to portray violence borne of class tensions, based on the rest of the quote included by Park.

with the creative and sensory aspects of art and music.[66] Tom Gunning describes the development of motion pictures into a form that bound sound and sight, as an evolving "attempt to recreate and capture the sensual world in several dimensions."[67] Perhaps then, film offers the greatest promise for a fuller, more effective representation of a complicated and evasive kind of history. That potential has not been lost on African American and other filmmakers desiring to make a statement about racial violence. Partially because of their accessibility and circulation, "cinematic representations of the rape/lynching narrative have also been of central importance for the production of collective memory and national process of racial formation." [68]

Shortly after D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* became a national sensation in 1915, African Americans sought to build on emerging motion picture techniques to make anti-lynching statements. Griffith put many of the lynching myths on screen that Wells-Barnett sought to disrupt, most notably ideas of the black male rapist, and acceptance of violence as a rational response to racial mixing. In 1919, director Oscar Michaeux released *Within Our Gates*, which strove to subvert some of the myths swirling around lynching.[69] Jacqueline Stewart states that "answering *Birth* [was] not Micheaux's sole objective, but the film does mobilize Black American cosmopolitanism and patriotism to

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[66] Consideration should be given to sound and how it might serve representations of lynching. Both Grace Hale and Edward Ayers cite the journal of Mell Barrett's experience with an early Edison recording of a lynching: "The sounds of shuffling feet, swearing men, rattle of chains, falling wood, brush, and fagots, then a voice – shrill, strident, angry, called out 'Who will apply the torch?' 'I will,' came a chorus of high-pitched angry voices...[I heard] the crackle of flames as it ate its way into the dry tinder...my eyes and mouth were dry. I tried to wet my lips, but my tongue, too was parched. Perspiration dripped from my hands. I stood immobile, unable to move," (Hale, *Making Whiteness*, 227). Clearly, other avenues exist for providing details of violence outside of visual means. Sound recordings can produce the same kind of shock and physical reaction as images of lynching.

[67] Tom Gunning, "Doing for the Eye What the Phonograph Can Do for the Ear," in *The Sounds of Early Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel and Rick Altman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 28

[68] Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 34.

[69] *Within Our Gates*, VHS, produced and directed by Oscar Micheaux (Washington, DC: Library of Congress/Smithsonian Video, 1993).

refute the racist discourses (and the powerful stylistic means of conveying them) that Griffith's landmark film represents."[70] By exposing holes in commonly deployed lynching myths and African American stereotypes, Micheaux's film can be seen as a protest of lynching as well as an affirmation of African American identity in the face of such violence.

Jane Gaines comments that, "perhaps Micheaux's portrait of the lynch mob is his signal achievement in this film, for he chooses to show what Blacks knew and Northern Whites refused to believe": that lynch mobs were diverse, chaotic, impulsive, and barbaric.[71] Micheaux also refutes accounts given by the white press of "accidental death at unknown hands," by showing *exactly* who lynches Efrem. Micheaux's representation of the double Landry lynching serves as perhaps his most striking indictment of the lynching narrative and its attendant myths. Following the highly symbolic deaths of the heroine Sylvia's adoptive parents, the mob builds a bonfire to burn their bodies. Cross-cutting scenes of the bonfire and white landowner Gridlestone's assault/attempted rape of Sylvia makes several statements about the intertwined myths of sexuality that accompany popular lynching narratives. Micheaux calls attention to violent liberties that white men in the South historically felt entitled to with black women. That Gridlestone only ceases his assault when he discovers that he is in fact Sylvia's father "remind[s] viewers of all the clandestine forced sexual acts that produced the mulatto population of the American South."[72] Showing Gridlestone's attack alongside the completed lynching of the Landrys

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[70] Jacqueline Najuma Stewart, *Migrating to the Movies: Cinema and Black Urban Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 230.
[71] Jane Gaines, "Fire and Desire: Race, Melodrama, and Oscar Micheaux," in *Black American Cinema*, ed. Manthia Diawara, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 54.
[72] Gaines, "Fire and Desire," 57.

(which could be *any* number of lynchings of black men) greatly undermined that threadbare lie alluded to by Ida Wells-Barnett.

Micheaux's use of the relatively short violent flashback as a dramatic climax suggests the pervasive impact racial violence has on African American identity. On one hand it seems curious that such a small segment of the film should dominate its narrative so greatly. Still, Sylvia's familial history determines our understanding of the key points throughout the rest of the film, suggesting the broad effects of lynching on African American life. Stewart suggests that, "by structuring *Within Our Gates* along a complex topography of narrative and character relations, Micheaux creates a film that mirrors the diverse but interconnected experiences of his African American characters and audiences."[73] Gaines considers the promotion for the film that focused on the relatively short lynching subplot to be partially an attempt to capitalize on the spectacular attraction of the violence, but also evidence of its importance in the mind of Micheaux and his audience. With *Within Our Gates*, Micheaux gave the tradition of repossessing the lynching narrative by showing neglected or hidden aspects of the lynching act new currency in motion pictures.[74]

While lynching might have become less conspicuous through the middle of the twentieth century, the trauma of that violence remained a subject for visual artists of all kinds. Additionally, while less acceptable to a general public, the original souvenir

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[73] Stewart, *Migrating to Modernity*, 237. It also seems important that much of the interaction amongst African American characters, and any deep character development occurs apart from the on-screen gaze of white characters. This seems to insist on deeper levels of African American life, not captured in mainstream, or white representations.

[74] Since Micheaux's time, many other films have been made addressing lynching and racial violence. One of the most recent and notable examples, *Rosewood* (1997) gives an actual event a fictional treatment complete with big name actors. Markovitz claims that Rosewood had a disappointing run at the box office, but does indicate that the film garnered a good amount of media attention, accompanied by an Oprah Winfrey television special, a PBS documentary and a new book. Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 63-67.

images of lynching victims managed to survive in attics and private collections. Collector James Allen's now-famous museum exhibition *Witness: Photographs of Lynching from the Collection of James Allen* raises and concentrates many of the problems and issues involved with viewing representations of lynching in a contemporary context.[75] Allen and John Littlefield exhibited their collection of original lynching photography and postcards at the Roth Horowitz Gallery in New York in 2001, and eventually the collection toured several other cities. Due to dangers of objectifying the victims, as well as issues of taste, many people have questioned the necessity of revisiting these terrible and traumatic images. In his essay accompanying the exhibit catalog, *Without Sanctuary*, Hilton Als questions, "the usefulness of [Allen's] project," even writing that it completely "escapes" him.[76] For Als, who feels constantly objectified by the gaze of whites on the street as well as in his creative life, the pictures of *Without Sanctuary* are dangerous because they do just the same thing to another African American body; and to one that can no longer speak up in protest against being made a spectacle. The negative aspects of displaying visual representations of lynchings need to be remembered here especially as they become reactivated and deployed in different ways. Jonathan Markovitz asks,

> if one of the functions of the photographs in the past was to continue the lynchings and deny refuge to the victims, then it is worth asking whether displaying the images in a gallery can finally provide the sanctuary that had so long been elusive.[77]

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[75] Many thousands of people viewed the Allen collection in New York or on tour; the initial Horwitz installation surpassed 5,000. In Atlanta, 50,000 people attended in the first two months of the exhibits time at the Martin Luther King, Jr. historic site. More, almost certainly, have seen the collection published in *Without Sanctuary*. Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 8-10.

[76] Hilton Als, "GWTW," in *Without Sanctuary*, 38.

[77] Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 138.

Still, there remains an urge to encounter the photographs of the Allen collection. Part of this desire might rise from a morbid curiosity, but much of it arises from a desire to witness in part the physical and psychic horror of racial violence that makes up part of American history. Dora Apel states an imperative that, "although the photos display the vulnerable black body and risk reproducing the prurient interest and humiliating effect of racist violence, we as a nation, cannot afford to be innocent of these photos."[78] In his foreword to the catalogue, Civil Rights hero and Congressman John Lewis dreams: "It is my hope that *Without Sanctuary* will inspire us, the living, and as yet unborn generations, to be more compassionate, loving, caring. We must prevent anything like this from ever happening."[79] For these advocates of the display, lynching photographs become as much a teaching tool as an act of reclamation. The necessity of keeping the visual record of America's racist violent history provides a huge benefit, even though, "it is easier to choose the path of collective amnesia."[80] For some, then, the risks of *not* looking outweigh the problems of looking at imagery of lynchings.

An important distinction in regards to the *Without Sanctuary* photographs has to do with the way they are viewed and how people encounter them. Not unlike Walter White, James Allen encouraged the contemporary viewer of the pictures to concentrate on aspects other than vicitmhood; "after you get through the shock, what lingers are images of the perpetrators and not of the corpses, and that's where the focus needs to be."[81] Furthermore, by aligning viewers to the aforementioned vantage point of the photographer, these pictures can cause the viewer to question their own spectatorship and

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[78] Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 2.
[79] John Lewis, "Foreword" in *Without Sanctuary*, 7.
[80] Leon Litwack, "Hellhounds," in *Without Sanctuary*, 33.
[81] Qtd. in Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, 9.

examine their own relationship with concepts of race and racial history.[82] To be fair, such a turn is complicated and cannot be assured. For instance, John Markovitz discusses a portion of the exhibit's website where people were allowed to post their reactions to the photographs, as well as view some of them. Reactions ranged from African Americans understandably protesting the photos' resurfacing to white supremacists applauding the lynchings themselves for their original racist intent.[83]

All of these representations of lynching can inform our understandings of both violence and racial experience. Extremely useful here is Alison Landsberg's concept of "prosthetic memory."[84] Landsberg argues that mass culture technologies, such as photography and film, have made it possible for people to "try on," memories that they otherwise would not have access to because of time, geography, or societal restrictions. While cognizant of the ability of mass reproduced "memories" to distort the past, Landsberg argues that experiential knowledge offered by films, museums, and photographs makes difficult aspects of the past more accessible than written or oral accounts. As important, people are not entirely able to "take off" those memories once they have experienced them, pointing to the possibility for significant alterations in people's subjectivity. In the least, Landsberg suggests, publicly encountered prosthetic memories can alter how a person relates to others. She notes that, "the experience of

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[82] Admittedly, this is a very different process of identification for black and whites, men and women – with different implication and different feelings of vulnerability and guilt.

[83] See Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 140-141.

[84] Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of* Mass Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004). Landsberg defines prosthetic memory as originating in part from, "privately felt public memories that develop after an encounter with a mass cultural representation of the past, when new images and ideas come into contact with a person's own archive of experience" (Ibid., 19).

feeling vulnerable or disempowered or of being put in the position of seeing through someone else's eyes might change how one sees the world and one's place in it."[85]

While the concept of prosthetic memory becomes problematic in that some memories can never be fully reproduced (like physical or emotional trauma), or prior experience might influence a person's engagement with a given memory more than Landsberg acknowledges, the potential for positive "memory projects" seems inspiring.[86] The effectiveness of prosthetic memory hinges in large part on empathy, requiring emotion and cognition, shock and safety. Sympathy, based largely in emotion, can produce positive identification with others but also creates an impression of victimhood and thus potentially reinforces hierarchies of race and gender. Empathy, on the other hand,

> is not purely emotional but also contains a cognitive component. It therefore takes work and thought to achieve. It is characterized by feeling for, while feeling different from the object...The connection one feels when one empathizes is more than a feeling or emotional connection; it is a feeling of cognitive, intellectual connection, an intellectual coming-to-terms with another person's circumstances.[87]

To what extent, then, an artist or filmmaker can produce identification across lines of difference, while also giving those boundaries meaning can determine their success in creating empathy amongst an audience, and thus their success in creating a positive agent for prosthetic memory.

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[85] Ibid., 101.

[86] Some are justifiably wary of this prospect, cf. Robert Burgoyne, "Prosthetic Memory/National Memory: *Forrest Gump*," in *Film Nation: Hollywood Looks at U.S. History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Burgoyne illustrates the dangers and possible pitfalls of unanchored and easily reshaped memories in regards to the film *Forrest Gump*, and the ways in which the film's narrative sanitizes and resolves tensions of the 1960's.

[87] Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory*, 149.

Films are perhaps the most powerful of generators for prosthetic memory, as the "cinema transports people into lives that they have not lived in the traditional sense but that they are nevertheless invited to experience and even inhabit, albeit briefly."[88] Landsberg points to anecdotes from early cinema as evidence of physical identification with what happens on screen, positioning the movie theatre as a "site in which people experience a bodily, mimetic encounter with a past that was not actually theirs."[89] Television complicates this dynamic, but also makes the mimetic properties of film transferable to a different kind of space by bringing the cinema into the home.

In the case of James Byrd, the chance to influence peoples' understanding of the lynching by representing it in detail outweighs the drawbacks.[90] Similar to Landsberg, Jonathan Markovitz theorizes that, "the emotional investment that viewers bring to films and the massive circulation of Hollywood films in particular enable commercial films to powerfully influence social agendas as they reposition us for the future by reshaping our memories of the past."[91] While the films about James Byrd are not large budget Hollywood films, they certainly hold the potential to affect the way an audience feels about race, violence, and power. Both *Two Towns* and *Jasper, Texas*, experienced largely through television, offer the benefits of prosthetic memory in regards to the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. What must be considered, however, are the techniques by which any representation, film or otherwise, seeks to portray the trauma experienced by Byrd and the residents of Jasper.

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[88] Ibid., 12.
[89] Ibid., 14.
[90] Landsberg's claim that, "the experience for a white person of seeing the world through black eyes, even if the experience is as short as the length of the film, might be powerful enough to serve as the first step in the long hard process of changing one's mode of thinking," lies remarkably close to the goals imagined by Walter White for his art show. Ibid., 149.
[91] Markovitz, *Legacies of Lynching*, 34.

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In his discussion of the increased prevalence of reenactments in documentary film, Bill Nichols offers a question and an answer:

> How does a text restore that order of magnitude which characterizes lived experience when it can only represent through evocations what lies beyond its own bounds? One set of answers, it seems, avoids invoking the power of disembodied knowledge and abstract conceptualization in favor of the enabling power stemming from situated knowledge and the subjectivities of corporeal experience.[92]

Rather than relying on complex verbal explanations or poetic mechanisms that might fail, the Showtime Channel movie *Jasper, Texas* portrays Byrd's lynching by vividly reenacting the dragging and consistently including simulated imagery of Byrd's decimated body. African American director Jeff Byrd uses the friendship of Sheriff Billy Rowles (Jon Voight) and Mayor R.C. Horn (Louis Gossett, Jr.) as a framing device to cushion the graphic revelation of the lynching violence, and stage a progressive story about Jasper's redemption after the tragedy. These narrative mechanisms, while forced and misleading, do make it easier for an audience to view the grisly portrayals of Byrd's death. Still, it seems possible to read the foregrounding of James Byrd's body as an insistence that an audience view the violent results of the lynching.

While *Jasper, Texas* loses some depth through its fictionalizations, its ability to hold an audience *and* illustrate a true event might exceed that of more complicated, documentary versions of the event, as well as that of written accounts. Valuing the potential of fiction to draw an audience to a text that deals with difficult and painful historical subjects brings us to closer to appreciating more fully the value of *Jasper,*

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[92] Bill Nichols, "Getting to Know You...': Knowledge, Power, and the Body," Theorizing Documentary, ed. Michael Renov (New York: Routledge, 1993), 188.

Texas.[93] While the repeated inclusion of Byrd's mutilated body moves the film's overall impression from one of shock to voyeurism, its violent impact ensures its prominence in the audience's experience and memory, if not understanding. The emotional portrayal of the actors allows an audience to identify sympathetically with those that survived James Byrd in Jasper. The evolving opinions of Horn and Rowles, while superficial, do allow an audience to recognize any differences between themselves and the racial experiences of Jasper residents dealing with the after effects of the lynching. This creates some manner of empathy on the part of the viewer, and thus some cognitive engagement, however shallow. By humanizing the narrative Jeff Byrd allows greater popular access to the event. Furthermore, visually recreating the terrible violence gives the viewer a sense of Byrd's lynching from a physical standpoint. While *Jasper, Texas* does reach towards sensationalism it also allows for the empathetic connection essential to Landsberg's concept of prosthetic memory, as well as offer an effective dramatic representation of lynching like that of *Within Our Gates*.

Jasper, Texas aired on Showtime on several occasions and remains available on DVD. Upon its premiere on June 9, 2003, national media gave *Jasper, Texas* a wide range of reviews. *The San Francisco Chronicle* dismissed it as "simplistic," "despite great performances from Voight and Gossett."[94] Closer to the scene of Byrd's death, *The Houston Chronicle* was much more celebratory: "The whole cast is as splendid as the

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[93] Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995). Rosenstone's attempt to look favorably on motion pictures as the "contemporary medium capable of both dealing with the past and holding a large audience" drive much of this reading of *Jasper, Texas*; an investigation into how "a visual medium, subject to the conventions of drama and fiction might be used as a serious vehicle for thinking about our relationship to the past" (ibid., 24, 3).

[94] David Wiegand, "Simplistic Jasper Misses Mark," *San Francisco Chronicle,* June 6, 2003, sec. D:1.

movie. Grade: A."[95] *The New York Times* television review gave Jeff Byrd's film a decidedly ambivalent treatment. Scott Vale peppered his review with adjectives like "earnest," "workmanlike," and "humanizing." Vale called the violent aspects "nearly unwatchable and all the more revolting for their brevity."[96]

In a documentary sense, *Jasper, Texas* does fall short as an effective representation of Byrd's lynching and its aftermath. The film suffers in its ability to fully represent the violence inflicted upon James Byrd, Jr. Besides the fact that no evidentiary photos of the body have been published, nor recordings of the lynching made, *Jasper, Texas* is a work at some levels a work of fiction.[97] While one can claim that Jeff Byrd's recreations of the murder approach realism, violence on film "arguably loses depth and any meaning accrued through traditional relations to the real world. Even the most graphic instance of violence in these films becomes like any other image, homogenized and emptied of meaning or seeming originality."[98] While historically specific violence has great potential for conveying a social message and disturbing an audience to the point of reflection, the staccato manner in which Jeff Byrd deploys his imagery blurs its real message.[99] Regardless of Jeff Byrd's best intentions, his use of visually reconstructed violence has a potentially dangerous side, not unlike Allen's re-use of lynching postcards

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[95] Ann Hodges, "Powerful Film Tells a story of Jasper," *Houston Chronicle,* June 8, 2003, 3. The review in *The Houston Chronicle* focuses on many of the feel good sentiments of the film.

[96] Scott Vale, "A Horrific Crime and a Town's Painful Soul-Searching," *New York Times*, June 6, 2003, sec. E:24.

[97] Writer Jonathan Estrin states that he had to make up very little for this story, which is probably comparatively true. Still, the dialogue and scenes are constructed to the point that they can be considered fictional. "Extras – Interview with Jonathan Estrin," *Jasper, Texas.*

[98] J. David Slocum, "Introduction: Violence and American Cinema; Notes for an Investigation," in *Violence and American Cinema*, ed. J. David Slocum (New York: Routledge, 2001), 21.

[99] Nationally circulated images of the body of Emmett Till did a great deal to galvanize support for new civil rights measures and the larger civil rights movement. Additionally, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other leaders of the mainstream Civil Rights Movement understood the impact that images of Bull Connor's police dogs and firehoses turned on young demonstrators in garnering supports for the movement. See "Birmingham and Beyond", in *Gonna Sit at the Welcome Table*, ed. Julian Bond and Andrew Lewis (New York : American Heritage, 1995).

and photographs. Constant flashbacks might suggest pervasiveness in memory, but it also leaves the viewer anxious for its reappearance without grasping its full magnitude. The unique and gruesome nature of the crime becomes cut down by an episodic, almost carnival portrayal.[100]

When portraying a violent act of historic specificity, especially of a recent nature, the stakes become enormous. The film's cover proclaims it to be "Based on a True Story," which can create the impression that the events on screen unfolded exactly as they are depicted. While this can be simultaneously harrowing and moving to a viewer, it can also free them from feeling any real connection to the actual act. Generally, it is safe for viewers to find relief in the notion that the violence that they see on screen is in fact not real. James Byrd's daughter Renee Mullins has characterized *Jasper, Texas* as more of "a horror story instead of an actual event. They didn't have to go into details as to how they mutilated his body."[101] Obviously, Byrd's daughter would find it hard to watch a recreation of her father's death. Her categorization of the film as a "horror story," though, belies its over-the-top style, and raises concerns about the potential ways that the violence might be interpreted. For all the didactic impact Jeff Byrd might hope to create, what cultural good do his images achieve if people refuse to watch?

Jeff Byrd's startling use of bloody staged images of the body, does create a sense of voyeurism. Part of this effect comes from Jeff Byrd's use of the mutilated African

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[100] Marsha Kinder, "Violence American Style: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions," in *Violence and American Cinema*, 68. On director Sam Peckinpah: "Because these violent numbers are so excessive, their rhythmic representation so kinetic, and their visceral pleasures so compelling, their cumulative effect provides a rival mode of orchestration that threatens to usurp the narrative's traditional function of contextualization through a seriality and an exuberance that render the film comic, no matter how painful, tragic, or satiric its narrative resolution may be."

[101] Mark Babineck, "Jasper Movie Gets Mixed Reaction From Family as Repeat Airings Near," The Associated Press, June 13, 2003.

American body, but also the manner in which he attempts to restage the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. Sean Berry's (Toby Proctor) confession of the crime and court testimony detailing Byrd's decapitation frame two series of crosscut flashbacks that restage the attack and dragging. During Berry's confession, the film portrays the three white men picking up James Byrd, Jr. (Roy T. Anderson), driving out to Huff Creek Road, and then assaulting him. Berry's claims that he participated unwillingly are heard over footage of a savage beating. The camera jerks suddenly and seems slightly sped up, heightening the tension. Two assailants shout, "go get the chain" and "Aw, hell yeah!" from off screen as they secure Byrd to the back of the truck. Bathed in red light, Byrd screams and the flashback ends. The violence Jeff Byrd includes is overwrought enough to achieve the "horror" movie quality to which Mullins refers.

While these concerns should be kept in mind, it also seems quite possible that they are too harsh and hold *Jasper, Texas* to standards for which it was never intended. Again, Rosenstone reminds us that many films, while desiring to represent an accurate historical account, are bound by the tenets of drama and fiction. Filmmakers accomplish such dramatics through certain inventions, in order to "to keep the story moving, to maintain intensity of feeling, [and] to simplify the complexity of events into plausible dramatic structure that will fit into filmic time constraints."[102] If these "fictional moves" serve to deepen the impact of the film, without falsifying the historical record, then such inventions and imaginations are acceptable.[103] In its efforts to create dramatic entertainment by simplifying and embellishing, *Jasper, Texas* actually facilitates

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[102] Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 68.

[103] *Two Towns of Jasper*, with more explicitly educational goals and supported by grants that fund educational outreach purposefully avoids such fictionalizations. cf, Working Films and Two Tone Productions, "Report from the Road: Two Towns of Jasper" (October 2003), http://www.workingfilms.org/downloads/2TownsReportRoad.pdf.

prosthetic memory. Furthermore, the vulgar and violent rendering of James Byrd's death is meant to upset the viewer, and perhaps shock them into recognition of the brutality of the lynching.

In order to create characters that an audience can identify with, Jeff Byrd focuses primarily on the relationship between Sheriff Rowles and Mayor Horn. Horn and Rowles are the first two characters that appear in the film - the Sheriff on his way to play golf, and the Mayor getting ready for church. Admittedly, making a film about a lynching from the perspective of the victim would have a very different focus, one for which it would be hard to frame a positive ending. Focusing on the struggle to prosecute Byrd's killers and redeem Jasper allows for a more uplifting, if incomplete account. While this might be unsatisfying in terms of historical veracity, to what extent Jeff Byrd can put together an uplifting story potentially makes the movie attractive to a broad audience.

For ease of story, and perhaps from a desire not to complicate the character of James Byrd, Jr., *Jasper, Texas* also omits more problematic aspects of his life. James Byrd, Sr. and Stella Byrd do discuss whether or not James, Jr. might be hung over somewhere when they believe him merely late for supper. When the Sheriff arrives at their home, Mrs. Byrd does ask Billy, "Did you arrest Son [James, Jr.'s nickname] again?" Here Jeff Byrd hints in part at some of James Byrd Jr.'s history of intoxication and arrest, but fails to include the whole story. These points are not made here in order to indicate any guilt on James, Jr.'s part, merely to show the tendency of *Jasper, Texas* to simplify the story to the point where important details about the experience of African Americans in Jasper become lost.

Clearly, completely whitewashing the reality of James Byrd's life or of the lives of African Americans in Jasper would be reprehensible. That being said, *Jasper, Texas* does at times make an attempt to explicate the variety of African American experiences. For instance, as Billy Rowles addresses the town's prominent religious leaders and asks them to help smooth things over around town, the fiery Reverend (Kedar Brown) exclaims, "Look here, if you want us to pretend that everything here is alright, well then, I don't even know why we're here."[104] He then stands as if to leave. Much later in the film, the Mayor's Task Force shows African American characters seeking solutions to police discrimination, country club segregation, and wide unemployment.[105] On the whole, however, Jeff Byrd and Jonathan Estrin filter out details of James Byrd's life and remove some deeper issues of race that affect the lives of African Americans in Jasper in an effort to make the film's characters emotionally accessible to a broader audience.

Towards the end of *Jasper, Texas*, Mayor RC Horn relates to his family a past episode of violence at the hands of whites that has upset him periodically for the duration of the film. Throughout the film, Horn experiences a few flashbacks to an old beating, but the viewer cannot determine exactly what the flashbacks show. Rendered in a sepia color scheme, Horn tells about his cousin Leroy, whom police beat almost to death when they suspected him of being involved sexually with a white woman. Horn's memory is meant to evoke a history of racial violence in the area and illustrates the maintenance of that memory within an African American family; not unlike stories surrounding the death of Ray Peacock in 1977.[106] Unlike *Two Towns of Jasper*, however, *Jasper, Texas* does not show those violent episodes being remembered *outside* of the home. Additionally, Jeff

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[104] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Four.
[105] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Seven.
[106] See p. 21.

Byrd and Jonathan Estrin make the memory part of the progress when Horn wraps up his memory by declaring a mission: "It's dangerous to forget...It's dangerous to remember...because then, you *got* to do something."[107]

While the real-life effectiveness of the task force (or other measures of reconciliation) remains debatable, their inclusion in *Jasper, Texas* suggests a sense of progress.[108] Part of what gives the film a "feel-good" quality is the insistence on showing Jasper citizens' acknowledgement of the town's problems, the conviction of Bill King, and a tidy ending with smiling main characters that are the best of friends. The growth of Billy Rowles mirrors a message that the movie's larger progression tries to impart, within one character. From his first arrival at the crime scene Rowles fills a stereotype as a white southern-good-old-boy sheriff, interested in cracking a hit-and-run case and naïve about potential racial implications.[109] As the case progresses, Rowles begins to analyze and question his own opinions on race as if he had never done so before. When Mayor Horn gives the results of the Mayor's Task Force to Rowles, the Sheriff remains unable to understand the issues faced by African Americans, believing the grievances were due to hard economic times:

> Rowles: Basically things is all right here, right?
> Horn: (interrupting) Wrong! We just been pretending. We been pretending all these years! Take care of these complaints. And if you're finished with that crime scene, take all them marks off the road. It's upsettin' people! [110]

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[107] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Ten.
[108] Temple-Raston quotes Unav Wade as saying, "Public dialogue is never really a dialogue. Nobody will admit to anything in a crowd, so all these public meetings, well, they were for show." Temple-Raston, *A Death in Texas*, 257.
[109] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter One. Rowles's pledge to the Byrd family ("I Promise I will not sleep until we find out who did this.") and promotion of a black deputy (Sergeant Carter) tells the audience that while he is unprepared for this case, Rowles is a tolerant and decent person
[110] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Nine.

The evolution of the relationship between the Mayor and Sheriff, as well as their personal examination of their racial realities, inspires similar reflection for an audience. While the discussion of race and difference in *Jasper, Texas* is not as complicated or comprehensive as that of *Two Towns*, the Showtime film still engenders some manner of cognitive engagement in the viewer. That intellectual connection, however superficial, creates a sense of empathy that gives the film and its imagery a value beyond sensationalism.

Later in the film, when Horn and Rowles are left alone at the table they come to terms with each others' prejudices - simplified down to epithets:

> Horn: I just can believe the mess that KK-man was spouting today.
> Rowles: What about the Panthers? Kill the white devils, you wanna see me dead RC?
> Horn: (leaning in)... You mean to tell me you never said the word 'Nigger?"
> Rowles: And you never said the words honkee? Cracker? Redneck, Peckerwood?[111]

The exchange ends in a verbal stalemate, but in what appears to be two days Rowles visit's Bo's Hardware Store and diplomatically asks Bo if he would consider hiring some black employees – presumably based upon the earlier complaints about black unemployment voiced at the meeting of the Task Force.

Most of the characters in this story have their roles or needs resolved by the end of *Jasper, Texas*, even if unsatisfactorily. An unrepentant Bill King goes to prison; District Attorney Guy James Gray (Ron White) wins his case; and the Byrd family sees justice for the death of their son. As the film draws to a close, Rowles and Horn share a few cigars, and the Mayor thanks the Sheriff for cleaning the evidence marks from Huff Creek Road. As a slight damper, the men talk about the elimination of the Mayor's stipend. Like Rowles, however, the town has changed for the better and Mayor Horn

[111] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Nine.

provides the final notes, "Things ain't gonna happen overnight....least ways, we ain't pretending no more."[112] All of these tidy endings, as sickly sweet as they might be, serve to pull out a positive, human identification which draws an audience nearer the subject matter. While they may be unsatisfying, they serve to set up what might be the film's most important possibility, that by portraying Byrd's dragging and his remains graphically, *Jasper, Texas* provokes a visceral and emotional reaction in a unique and powerful way.

Given the pains *Jasper, Texas* makes to develop and resolve character issues for others, it is problematic that it reduces James Byrd, Jr.'s character to almost a one dimensional prop. Immediately after the opening credits, however, Jeff Byrd makes clear that a horrific and gruesome use of Byrd, Jr.'s body is intended to fill out the emotional impact of the violence and in some ways reinsert Byrd, Jr. into a film that takes place entirely after his death. Not only does this visually tie the realities of racial violence to an African American body, but it ensures that an audience cannot forget the extent of the brutality on Huff Creek Road by fixing that trauma in memory long after the final credits. This connection objectifies an already violated African American man, but also makes sure that James Byrd, Jr. remains present in the story; an aspect that *Two Towns* neglects. While limited, Jeff Byrd inserts an African American subjectivity by portraying James Byrd, while still alive: Roy Anderson sings on a videotape to showcase Byrd's musical talent for the Byrd family, and Anderson also acts out Byrd's tortured reaction to the dragging. *Jasper, Texas* fixes a violated African American body in the memory of the

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[112] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Ten.

audience, but it also briefly offers a glimpse of James Byrd's personal experience and pain.[113]

To borrow from Robert Rosenstone's criteria, the physical violence in *Jasper, Texas* has the potential to make one feel "immediately and deeply" about the lynching of James Byrd, Jr.[114] The viewer encounters James Byrd's body at the same time as Billy Rowles, walking backwards from the trail of blood and tissue on the road. As he approaches the ditch alongside the road the camera drops to gaze up into Rowles's confused face. An eerie, tense music increases in volume, paired with the sound of buzzing flies. As Rowles leans closer to inspect the grass, Byrd's damaged face and head flash on the screen followed by choppy shots of other body parts alongside the road. Before the film gives the viewer much time to ponder what the images are, they disappear, and Rowles horrified expression is meant to mirror that of the audience.[115] The initial eruption of Byrd's violated body foreshadows a pattern wherein Byrd's body is shown either being beaten, dragged, or after death, but always through violent flashbacks with intense sound crescendos that include the jangling of a chain.

While the first shots of the body spur a desire to see more and find out what happened, the upsetting glimpses can be seen to encourage a self-reflection not unlike that of the photos in *Without Sanctuary*. Discussing director Sam Peckinpah's orchestration of periodic violence, Marsha Kinder offers that,

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[113] Including the experience of the African American victim was a major goal of Walter White's 1935 "Art Commentary on Lynching Show." Some excellent examples of artists representing this subjectivity at the show were Julius Bloch's *The Prisoner* (1934) and Samuel J. Brown's *The Lynching* (1934), (Apel, *Imagery of Lynching*, Figure 50, Plate 1). Insight into the African American experience is largely absent from lynching photography. With one exception, the victims collected in the Allen collection are deceased and cannot give the viewer the impression of what they might have experienced. Frank Embree was photographed both before and after he was killed. Though he had been stripped and whipped, Embree looks towards the camera with "undiminished dignity" (*Without Sanctuary*, 183).

[114] Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past*, 57.

[115] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter One.

> representations of violence as a series of or rhythmic eruptions [can] orchestrate the spectator's emotional response....The pauses also lead us to become aware of our own complicity as spectators, for they make you realize how eager we are for the violent spectacle to be unleashed.[116]

Thus, while the constant reappearance of Byrd's remains might be detached from their context and fetishized, it also seems possible for them to achieve a more subtle subconscious result, and aid a transition from repulsion to reflection. When Sean Berry sits down in the police station for questioning, Rowles's intense, accusatory interrogation is shot from directly over Berry's shoulder, causing the audience to feel as if they might be implicated in the crime. The initial response from the audience would be disgust for Berry's racism and complicity, but Voight's accusatory gaze serves to intimidate the audience as well. As Berry confesses, and the initial beating of Byrd is reenacted in flashback, a sense of anxiety becomes compounded with guilt and regret.[117] Furthermore, the filmic recurrence of the images of Byrd's body can be said to represent not only the return of traumatic memories, but also the real life desire of Jasperites to imagine or know about the specifics of the crime.[118]

A few other overt portrayals of violence demand complex thinking about the crime, with Byrd's body as the centerpiece. In these scenes, images of Byrd's lynched and recovered body linger on the camera while other characters provide commentary. The first of these moments occur in the morgue, as Rowles and Horn discuss the complexities of their evolving investigation. The camera lingers on James Byrd's body

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[116] "Violence American Style: The Narrative Orchestration of Violent Attractions," 65.
[117] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Three.
[118] Bessel A. van der Kolk, Alexander C. McFarlane, Lars Weisaeth, eds. *Traumatic Stress: The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body, and Society* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996). Sections I and IV offer a helpful overview of the development of theories about trauma and memory within psychology. In regards to Jasperites attraction to images of the trauma, Temple-Raston considers Wilma Dougherty, who "like many people in Jasper, had a secret fascination for the Byrd murder. It was like a gruesome accident one could not help looking at" (Temple-Raston, *A Death in Texas*, 40).

while Rowles stands in the background and says, "I don't know what a hate crime is, I mean exactly the strict legal wording, but I think that's what we got here."[119] With Byrd's remains in the foreground there can be no doubt, either for the audience or for Rowles, about the true nature of Byrd's death. This scene does serve to establish the mental frameworks of both Horn and Rowles, but it also historically anchors the crime in legal debates happening in 1998 that the lynching amplified. By grounding a visual of the corporeal aftermath of lynching in a specific historical moment, Jeff Byrd represents some of its political and social relevance.

The most important portrayals of the violence inflicted upon James Byrd occur during two separate courtroom scenes within *Jasper, Texas*.[120] During both of these scenes posters and projected slides of Byrd's injuries are shown to the court and the audience. The graphic images remain in frame while testimony proceeds, briefly cutting away to show reactions of jurors or the Byrd family. Interestingly, the public display of these injuries is one of the most blatant inventions in the film. As stated previously, during the real trials, pictures of Byrd's body were put into binders and distributed to the jurors only.[121] Clearly, the desire to texture the court room, as well as to lean on the visual impact of the massacred body required the insertion of staged photographs into the mise-en-scene – both to create a context a for a shocked reaction by the Byrd family and elicit a sense of disgust from the film's audience.

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[119] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Three.

[120] The first of these court scenes dominates Chapter Seven. The second, with the coroner's analysis and reenacted dragging occurs as a series of crosscuts in Chapter Ten. A short dragging reenactment, imagined by Horn, occurs at the end of Chapter Seven; he is outside of court and contemplating Huff Creek Road.

[121] See King, *Hate Crime*, 120; Temple-Ralston, *A Death in Texas*, 200. Temple-Ralston indicates that the binder strategy subverted a desire to visually know Byrd's injuries: "Jasperites found themselves craning for a better view of Gray's evidence."

At one point in the first courtroom scene DA Gray instructs the jury, or perhaps the viewer: "I'm going to show you some pictures of the body, and they are pretty rough to handle. But they're important evidence. I'd ask you not only to look at them, but to study them some."[122] For the viewer, there is little choice but to look while Rowles describes and interprets the photographs for us; while sometimes out of focus, it is never unclear what the slides represent. At one point, Rowles haltingly describes the manner in which Byrd's head became separated from his body by gesturing with his hands. Rather than let the images drift without some sort of meaning, Jeff Byrd uses Rowles and the coroner to describe an act of deliberate violence, made legible on James Byrd's terrible remains. J. David Slocum writes that, "images themselves may or may not denote violence or produce certain effect for given audiences. Further, even images of blatant violence on screen, physical or otherwise, beg for multiple and complexly determined responses from viewers."[123] Billy Rowles's narration of the horrific images, while in some ways spectacular, helps guide an audience to a response of disgust while illustrating the magnitude of physical trauma experienced by James Byrd. That Rowles exhibits an emotional response similar to our own, aids Jeff Byrd's project:

> Gray: [referring to a slide of Byrd's body] Where are his pants and underwear? Sheriff how would you describe that there?
> Rowles: The way we see it – they's pulled down like that [pause]...he was dragged, and, uh, the perpetrators...[can not finish]

One of the most powerful aspects of District Attorney Gray's real prosecution in all three trials came in the form of the completely silent eleven-minute video tape tracing the entire three miles that the killers dragged James Byrd, Jr. Dow and Williams bookend

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[122] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter 10.
[123] Slocum, *Violence and American Cinema*, 4.

Two Towns of Jasper with similar footage to great effect, which will be considered shortly. For a percussive, graphic film like *Jasper, Texas,* however, the subtle power of such a document would not make much sense. As an alternative, Jeff Byrd recreates the actual dragging of James Byrd to offer a greater sense of what might have happened. The choice to cast Roy Anderson, also listed in the final credits as Head Stunt Coordinator, in the role of James Byrd, Jr. indicates Jeff Byrd's intention to make the dragging reenactment the central part of the character's time on screen.

Any attempt to fully recapture Byrd's lynching falls hopelessly short, but it seems there is something to be gained from creating and witnessing a representation of Byrd's death. Most notably, allowing Anderson to imagine Byrd's pain and expression as he was dragged gets a step closer to recovering the victim's experience than what simple images of Byrd's corpse might suggest. Byrd's (i.e., Anderson's) body is actually shown being dragged behind a truck down Huff Creek Road, in a scene punctuated by Anderson's screaming. The viewer's perspective shifts from beside the road, to looking backwards out the cab of the truck, and then to facing the oncoming pick-up as Byrd's body swings out to the side. Perhaps most disturbingly, the camera occasionally adopts the view from Byrd's position, looking up at the back of the truck. Finally, as Rowles demonstrates the separation of Byrd's head and shoulder with his hands, *Jasper, Texas* shows the viewer what it might look like to speed into the concrete drainage culvert. Again, Jeff Byrd's recreation of James Byrd's subjectivity is not unlike the attempts made by the artists at White's "Art Commentary on Lynching." In a similar way, Jeff Byrd manages to recreate a secret and violent act so that it might be more widely seen, and understood for its gruesomeness.

Additionally, the adoption of Byrd's perspective suggests the kind of imagined and bodily identification that makes prosthetic memory pieces work. William Rothman offers a simplified account of vicarious identification with staged violence:

> We imagine we are not merely viewing but living this exhilarating, terrifying moment of violence. (It is exhilarating because it is terrifying, but it is also terrifying because it is exhilarating.) We imagine that we are living and not merely imagining we are living this moment. We might well find ourselves thanking our lucky stars, as we are viewing, that the medium of film separates us from [that] world...[124]

It seems possible then, to interpret the reenactment of Byrd's lynching as an attempt to inspire that sort of empathetic connection with the tragedy of his death. Certainly, the speculative nature of Anderson's screams and the highly stylized flashbacks that frame the violence push the film towards spectacle, thus increasing the possibility for a viewer to slough off those images as imaginary or fantastic. The benefit here comes from how disruptive the dragging becomes: shot in dim lighting, sometimes out of focus, choppily edited, perforated with screams, the sound of a chain, and a growl like that of an engine. The staged violence represented here frightens the viewer; knowledge that it *did* happen only compounds that fear, burning it further in memory. Author Joyce King, Gossett's staged R.C. Horn, and James Byrd, Jr.'s real life sisters – all it is worth noting, African Americans -- all imagine themselves in James, Jr.'s place on the night of his lynching, being dragged to their own death. For people (or characters) with little knowledge and lesser connection to the events of *Jasper, Texas*, Jeff Byrd's visuals might aid the viewer's grasp of the weight of that violence.

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[124] William Rothman, "Violence and Cinema," in *Violence and American Cinema*, 43.

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Discussing different uses of violence by African American filmmakers, Ed Guerrero comments that "because film is an intensely visual medium, audiences whether impressionable or sophisticated, will always look past what a director says about a film's lofty intents to the visible evidence of what a film actually shows them on the big screen."[125] If one imagines an audience, even of the "sophisticated" variety, misinterpreting Jeff Byrd's violent recreations of the Byrd lynching, then much of the benefit of *Jasper, Texas* gets lost as well. Outside of traditional dramatic performance, what other filmic strategies might we imagine to represent and remember traumatic incidents, especially lynching? *Two Towns of Jasper* offers several interesting options for learning about racial violence, largely without objectifying an African American victim.

Many documentary films place specific value on embodied, personally concrete forms of knowledge and use combinations of the real and imagined "to demonstrate how embodied knowledge provides entry into an understanding of the more general processes at work in society."[126] Initially, it seems that strategies of performance have little place within *Two Towns of Jasper*. On the contrary, however, it becomes possible to consider the verbal accounts and imaginings of Byrd's death as performative in the way that they evoke the violence enacted upon James Byrd, Jr., and as a deliberate strategy to contain the magnitude of that trauma. While the filmmakers include graphic details, Byrd family members largely control the representations of James, Jr.'s experiences and allow the

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[125] Ed Guerrerro, "Black Violence as Cinema: From Cheap Thrills to Historical Agonies," in *Violence and American Cinema*, 217.
[126] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 131.

filmmakers to add an emotional edge to details surrounding his death.[127] Furthermore, Dow and Williams draw on memorial strategies that rely on familial relationships, strategies in place in African American communities from the earliest days of lynching.

Documentary filmmakers seek to create some representation of the actual world, and the potential audience meets that intent with the expectation that documentary films portray a true, indexical linkage to lived experience. Obviously, the influence of a filmmaker's choices mediates our understanding of that linkage and its meaning heavily. Nonetheless, our understanding of a documentary film's connection to the real world privileges its place as explicitly non-fiction. Like the images they contain, documentary films are perpetually "boosted by the indexical whammy of our own belief in their authenticity."[128] Marco Williams and Whitney Dow evoke an indexical relationship to a specific, time, space, and event in reality, even while stating on the cover of *Two Towns* that there is "No single Truth."[129] Those kinds of complications give the film a reflexive quality, leading to the kind of cognitive and empathetic connection that Alison Landsberg considers a crucial part of prosthetic memory. *Two Towns of Jasper* explores varying notions of truth and history that surround a single event in the hopes of encouraging increased reflection in regards to race, violence, and justice. At times more complicated and always more subtle than *Jasper, Texas*, *Two Towns of Jasper* provides an account of the lynching of James Byrd, Jr. that extends beyond the singular act.

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[127] Cf. *The Untold Story of Emmett Louis Till*, DVD directed by Keith Beauchamp (New York: Till Freedom Come Productions, LLC, 2005). Beauchamp uses interviews with Emmett Till's family in the same way. Mamie Till-Mobley's recounting of her son's injuries actually forms the emotional climax of the documentary.
[128] Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, 57.
[129] *Two Towns*, video jacket

As news of James Byrd's murder spread across the country, longtime friends Marco Williams and Whitney Dow began plans to produce a film documenting the reactions of Jasper citizens during the ensuing trials and media coverage.[130] As might have been expected in the face of sudden national media scrutiny about a horrific murder, authorities in Jasper tried to portray their county as an example of racial harmony and rural simplicity, and not an epicenter for Ku Klux Klan activity.[131] In a county dependent on tourist revenue, black and white civic leaders sought to portray the entire county of Jasper as a place of absolute harmony.[132] Whitney Dow described the town as projecting a manufactured, "positive image of race relations...a P.R. blitz."[133] White residents sought to project themselves on camera as open minded and tolerant about race, while black residents suggested that, privately, white opinions were less than progressive. Dow and Williams viewed the media facade of Jasper as a challenge and developed a unique technique to move beyond the "public relations" story of race and violence in Jasper.[134]

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[130] Elvis Mitchell, "Film Festival Shows Tone of the U.S.: It's Somber," Critic's Notebook, *New York Times*, March 12, 2002, sec. E:1; Neil Genzlinger, "Horror Mixes With Hope in Two Reports on Racial Killings," *New York Times*, January 20, 2003, sec. E:1. Whitney Dow and Marco Williams began touring with their film in early 2002, and along with limited theatrical screenings Two Towns premiered on PBS on January 22, 2003. The PBS premiere of Two Towns also led to specials on *Nightline* and *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. (Working Films and Two Tone Productions, "Report from the Road: Two Towns of Jasper")

[131] Jimmy Galvan, "Justice is Served: 'Team' Secured Right Decision for County, Family," *Jasper Newsboy*, February 15, 2006. Efforts to rescue Jasper's image continued long after the resolution of the trials.

[132] In the 1980's drooping lumber prices and rising workers' compensation fees ended the lives of many smaller timber outfits and the jobs they provided. By 1998 Jasper struggled with great poverty, and unemployment rates sat at 15%. Increasingly, Jasper looked towards a growing outdoor tourism industry (built on fishing tournaments in local lakes) for income. See, Temple-Raston, *A Death in Texas*, 29-38.

[133] Marco Williams and Whitney Dow, "A Racially Motivated Murder Leads to a Uniquely Reported Documentary," *Neiman Reports*, Fall 2003, 17.

[134] Mike McDaniel, "A House Divided Against Itself: Film Reveals Racial Schism in Jasper Even After Tragedy," Houston Chronicle, January 19, 2003, sec. Z: 10. Reviews of *Two Towns* were more positive, or less ambivalent in their treatment of the documentary than the reviews of *Jasper, Texas*. Additionally, according to Guy James Gray, *Two Towns* "was real good... I looked at this film, and I think they hit the truth. I think the struck a nerve." Rev. Ray Lewis countered, "I think the film is great because it shows the side the media didn't show," (Quoted. in McDaniel, "A House Divided," 10).

Whitney Dow, who is white, and Marco Williams, who is black, used similarly segregated film crews to interview the respective communities in Jasper. Each hoped to encourage more honest responses about the crime itself and the state of race relations in Jasper (and by extension America).[135] Dow explained his method: "There's no functional language to discuss race anymore. And this was our attempt to create a language by allowing others to listen to people talking honestly about issues and ideas."[136] At the beginning of the film two text screens inform the audience of the filmmakers' technique and the use of the separate production teams.[137] The fact that no mixed race interview groups appear reminds the viewer of the film's rigid structure; however, there is no further commentary by the filmmakers on their method. To some extent, Dow and Williams are guilty of forcing categories of opinion on their subjects and creating the impression of rigid racial separation in Jasper.[138] The binary that emerges, however, not only helps illustrate their points about divergent knowledge about racial violence, but also helps move the narrative along.

Certainly, putting together a film requires many choices, and we have little way of knowing which or how many scenes were cut by Dow and Williams. Essentially, when Williams and Dow reconvened to edit *Two Towns*, they had to combine the footage for

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[135] See, Ira Berlin, Marc Ravreau, and Steven F. Miller, "Introduction: Slavery as Memory and History," in *Remembering Slavery: African Americans Talk About Their Personal Experiences of Slavery and Emancipation* (New York: The New Press, 1998), xiii – xlvii. The introduction summarizes some of the infamous ways race has historically complicated oral history.; cf, Donald Ritchie, *Doing Oral History: A Practical Guide* (London: Oxford University Press, 2003) Ritchie also cites alternate histories given by former slaves during WPA interviews in the 1930s when interviewed by both white and black interviewers at different times. However, Ritchie seems to feel that sufficient preparation circumvents difficulty caused by race, something Dow and Williams might dispute.

[136] *Washington Post*, Online Discussion with Marco Williams and Whitney Dow, January 23, 2003, <http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/zforum/03/sp_tv_jasper01203.htm > (23 January 2003).

[137] One screen reads, "Over the course of three separate murder trials, from January through December 1999, two producers documented the town of Jasper. A black crew filmed the black residents. A white crew filmed the white residents." *Two Towns*.

[138] Dow and Williams do show regular public interaction between African Americans and whites in Jasper. This fluidity does not extend to the interviews.

two movies into one. Marco Williams characterized the process as quite trying. Not only did their premise mandate dual viewpoints for narrative balance, the placement of statements within the larger argument had definite implications. According to Williams:

> Who defines the context of a given scene or the order of the story is an assertion of power. No decision is simply an aesthetic choice. Who speaks first or last in a given sequence is of subtle if not overt significance. Struggles about this power played themselves out repeatedly in the editing room. [139]

While painting a picture of black-and-white opinion that is somewhat reductive borders on the irresponsible, fleshing out that dual structure is required for the movie. Furthermore, allowing African American Jasperites to speak with authority on certain subjects, such as the history of racism in Jasper, gives a public outlet for grievances that previously might have been denied by a white majority.

In one sense then, the filmmakers sought to construct an honest dialogue about race relations, using their interviewees' reactions to an act of acute racial violence and the ensuing trials. Using racially homogenous production teams in an effort to ease racial tensions between interviewer and respondent is an understandable first step in producing a more honest interview; however, it masks a few problems. First, education, gender, and regional differences could skew an interview in the same ways – causing Jasperites to provide guarded answers. Again, the sudden arrival of media and figures from outside areas caused anxiety and a defensive posturing by Jasper's elites. Presumably, two filmmakers raised and educated in the North might engender some guarded behavior among many citizens of Jasper.[140] Efforts were made to overcome other barriers by

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[139] *Neiman Reports*, 18.

[140] McDaniel, "A House Divided Against Itself." Guy James Gray also reflects that the filmmakers are "Yankees to begin with. They've got a black guy out filming blacks and a white guy out filming whites, and they come out with a film called *Two Towns of Jasper*. That sounds like a film that's going to be

selecting a broad pool of respondents. In one interview, Whitney Dow explains an effort to circumvent such problems by speaking with white people of a "variety of economic and education levels" and making an attempt to "represent a broad swath of Jasper's white society." [141] In some sense, these barriers might never be broken and must have been accepted by the filmmakers.

Presumably, some respondents did not or could not answer the filmmakers' questions, and including interviews with many people served to round out a fairer picture of opinion about race in Jasper. The filmmakers also sought to achieve more honest responses by maintaining a lengthy and meaningful contact with their subjects. The length of the three trials meant that the film crews lived in Jasper for the better part of two years (although gaps are apparent) and some manner of familiarity was achieved. By the end of the Berry trial at the conclusion of the film, respondents speak to producers by name and Marco Williams appears in court sitting with the Byrd family.[142] Thus, while they seem to ignore some of the limitations of their technique, the filmmakers took steps to overcome other obstacles in their interviews.

Although Dow and Williams state their premise in the beginning of the film, the observational nature of the film largely masks their involvement. Dow and Williams do not offer any direct commentary in the sense of voice-over or explanation. Only two questions that begin an interview remain in the film and those are spoken from off screen. The most relied-upon narration comes from Mike Lout, the director and news anchor for a local Jasper radio station, KJAS. During Lout's description of Dr. Tommy Brown's

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divisive." In the same article Marco Williams comments that "candid expression is critical," and indicates that the film was shown in advance to those who were interviewed, indicating a trusting relationship (also see n. 137 for limitations on interviewing).

[141] *Washington Post*, 2.

[142] *Two Towns*.

testimony regarding Byrd's injuries, Dow and Williams show large numbers of Jasperites listening to the broadcast. By positioning Lout's commentary as a commonly shared aspect of life in the town, Dow and Williams create a narrative voice that can simultaneously be understood as *from* Jasper and committed to an objective account regardless of personal feelings.[143] The filmmakers allow Mike Lout's personal, off-air reactions to enter the story, however, which calls his "official" narration into question. The lack of a consistent and objective narrator increases the viewer's engagement with the subject, but also provides little solid ground from which to interpret the other respondents. The ambivalent, often conflicting, story of race relations in Jasper encourages an audience to connect cognitively with the film's narrative, producing the kind of reflection integral in producing prosthetic memories.

Visually, *Two Towns of Jasper* juxtaposes contradictory images and speech to produce questions about the reliability of certain opinions and racial understandings. One member of the "Bubbas-in-Training" breakfast group, which Dow and Williams position as the majority white viewpoint in Jasper, states that even without a capital conviction in the Bill King trial, "a lot of people would be happy."[144] Immediately, Dow and Williams cut to a scene of khaki-clad Texas State Troopers filing off of a bus, and patrolling the streets on horseback. Their very appearance sets the previous comment on its edge. The troopers' protective posing suggests the potential that someone might be very *un*happy with the trial's outcome. At another point, when Trent Smith initially describes Jasper as a community that secretly wishes to be racially segregated, Dow and Williams splice in shots of mixed race groups of children playing basketball. Here the filmmakers reference

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[143] While viewers are led to believe that most of Lout's commentary goes out over the KJAS airwaves, it also seems probable that Lout contributed some voice work to add to the film later.
[144] *Two Towns*.

an age-old pattern of maturation in the South, where white and black children cease contact past a certain age, but they also raise questions about Smith's authority on the subject.[145]

One of the strengths of *Two Towns of Jasper* lies in the connections made between the Byrd lynching and the complicated historical issues surrounding the politics of race. Not only do these contradictory images draw out the ways that racial formations inform the lives of people in Jasper, they also explicitly align Byrd's lynching with more subtle racial projects. While Lewis expresses relief at the outcome of the first trial, two police cruisers sit in stake-out mode across the street from a publicly-subsidized housing complex (populated mainly by African Americans). The contradictory pairing of a positive speech that suggests racial progress with images of continued systemic poverty and racism in an African American neighborhood raises questions about the exact circumstances of Byrd's death and more general consequences of race and class. The audience's focus is allowed to slip past the magnitude of the crime, and onto other issues facing African Americans in Jasper. These pairings resist easy explanation. Moreover, neither Dow and Williams nor any Jasperites attempt their reconciliation, further complicating the picture of Jasper with which the audience must grapple. Of course, Dow and Williams' purpose in Jasper is observational, and they do not intend to work through these contradictions with their subjects.

On the other hand, the filmmakers include imagery that is in no way ambivalent and its inclusion suggests the strong feelings of the filmmakers. For instance, while

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[145] Children play a curious role in *Two Towns*. Repeated images of white and black children are shown playing together, including at UNAV's hair salon. The one child that speaks denies racism exists at her school because they all play together. One of the Bubbas-In-Training chides the young girl and she becomes embarrassed. When *Two Towns* does portray children it is not clear whether or not they understand what has happened, but they clearly do not hold the rigid opinions of their elders.

African American Jasperites understand Byrd's murder as a lynching, it is curious that no one uses that word specifically. Perhaps reluctance to use the word "lynch" could be seen as some manner of denial or even dissociation on the part of the people of Jasper, similar to that reflected in press accounts. At the same time, were African Americans in Jasper to express their understanding of the Byrd lynching more strongly, white Jasperites could less realistically reduce the crime's significance. It does seem fair to assert that Dow and Williams felt the connection to lynching to be very active, despite a change in language, and were also not bound by a desire for self-protection or reconciliation. One image included by Dow and Williams symbolically anchors Byrd's murder in a lynching tradition. During footage of the Rodeo Day Parade, one float carries two aging white cowboys, a scaffold, a sign reading "FRONTIER JUSTICE," and a single noose. The float appears on screen for no more than three seconds, moving from left to right. The sign reminds one explicitly of the scaffold used for the 1893 lynching in Paris, Texas bearing the banner of "JUSTICE." Before disappearing the noose becomes a silhouette against a blue sky, not unlike the rope used to hang Jasper Landry in *Within Our Gates*. The briefly appearing image of the float is very troubling, and Jasper's silence on the matter makes it much more curious. The inclusion of the noose image easily guides the viewer towards thoughts of lynchings in decades past, even as Jasperites choose other words to express the same feelings.

Despite his unreliability, Trent Smith's first interview actually speaks to one of *Two Towns'* finer points. As children play behind his truck, Smith states:

> If you go to any town and ask a black person if [Byrd's death is] racist they're gonna say yes, because any little problem they have with a white person...its almost stereotypical...its horrible to say this...every black person is gonna tell

> you there is racism in their town, and white people are gonna say no. Because they don't see it.[146]

On the one hand, Smith unwittingly points to a subtle privilege of whiteness, the ability to ignore the implications of race in one's daily life. More importantly, Smith presupposes the divergent ways that black and white Jasperites interpret the death of James Byrd, Jr. That binary opposition - where African Americans understand that Byrd was lynched because of his race, and whites seek to divorce Byrd's race from his death to the point where it becomes just another murder - exists through the entire film, with a few exceptions. The reasons for this inability to understand have a good deal to do with a history of racial violence, hidden and public, experienced by black Jasperites. To paraphrase Trent Smith, whites felt free to either explain away a history of racially based violence, or just not examine it full on. In his second interview, Smith reveals that he has just left prison. Smith's tattoos align him with the same Aryan Brotherhood groups with which Byrd's killers were affiliated. By the time Mike Lout describes Jasper race relations as a "get-along kind of thing," towards the end of the film, that characterization appears entirely false.

Part of the very different ways that whites and blacks sought to come to terms with Byrd's lynching reflects patterns apparent in previously discussed narrative strategies. As suggested by Ed Ayers, white newspapers and apologists sought to place blame upon lynching victims, reducing white culpability. Black activists like Walter White and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, on the other hand, found it important not only to diffuse white excuses, but to foreground the brutality and senselessness of the lynching act. What might be considered new in *Two Towns* of Jasper is the inclusion of African American

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[146] *Two Towns*.

voices beyond those of high profile leaders. As Bruce Baker indicates, the sense of vulnerability ensured by lynching and racial terrorism prevented all but a few African Americans from drawing attention to their private experiences with violence.[147] Dow and Williams draw these understandings out and tie them into the narrative. Placing those historically silenced African American accounts of Byrd's lynching on equal footing with the understanding of white Jasperites throws the chasm between white and black understanding into greater relief.

The opening scenes of *Two Towns* illustrate this gap in a subtle, yet important way. Sheriff Rowles relates that when he first received the call to come to Huff Creek Road, police were treating the crime as a hit-and-run accident. As the early investigation began to suggest otherwise, Sheriff Rowles then began to "hope that a black man had killed [Byrd]. But it didn't turn out that way."[148] In hindsight, Sheriff Rowles expressed some inkling of understanding about the racial magnitude of the crime, but only as the police accumulated evidence suggesting foul play. While Rowles and DA Gray come to exhibit an understanding of the racial nature of Byrd's murder that other whites do not, this may be more due to their profile in Jasper, and an eagerness to make the case against the three killers to protect their town's image. It remains unclear if either Gray or Rowles understand Byrd's lynching as more than an anomaly. Moreover, *Two Towns* does not indicate that Rowles or any other white Jasperites felt any sense of fear, or an immediate understanding that Byrd's died because of his race.

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[147] Also see, Adam Gussow, *Seems Like Murder Here: Southern Violence and the Blues Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002). Gussow traces narratives of violence and vulnerability through Southern blues texts. Often, song lyrics and other techniques served to represent or remember incidents of racial violence when it was dangerous for African Americans to do so. By Gussow's estimation these texts were largely understood and easily transmitted away from the eyes of white policing.

[148] *Two Towns.* Presumably, the memory of the race riot from Rowles' youth in Beaumont gave him some fear of the realities of Byrd's lynching and what it could mean for his county. Just as likely, Rowles' career in law enforcement gave him a wider knowledge of criminal violence than that of many civilians.

In sharp contrast to the sheriff's account, the filmmakers show an interview with the town's morticians – an African American father-son team dispatched to retrieve Byrd's body. The two men recount coming across the trail of blood and tissue, already marked for evidence. Rodney Coleman states, "Right away we knew, or I felt, and I told my father at the time, I said 'Daddy, they...' I said, 'some white people had did it'. You just had that gut feeling, that it was race-related.'"[149] These few reactions, included at the outset of the film, offer a glimpse into the unspoken understandings that influence people's reactions to the crime. On the way to pick up a corpse that they knew to be of an African American man, and faced with a widely visible scene of violence, the Coleman morticians likely drew on intimate memory of lynching and racial terror. To borrow from James Baldwin, "it is absolutely impossible for authority to scent danger as swiftly as does the menaced human being."[150] Dow and Williams illustrate a sense of vulnerability and secret knowledge held closely by African Americans in Jasper, in an attempt to open up for the viewer "the ancestral, daily historical truth of Black life in this country."[151] For the Colemans, very few details of the crime were necessary for them to infer that a white man had lynched a black man.

Dow and Williams show that for African Americans in Jasper feelings about Byrd's death are intimately tied to their own racial identity and inspire a sense of vulnerability. At one point, Byrd's daughter Renee Mullins speaks directly into the camera. Describing her father's murder she states, "it could have been me, it could have been you."[152] Closer thinking renders this moment problematic. While the comment

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[149] *Two Towns.*
[150] James Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), 49.
[151] Ibid.,, 49.
[152] *Two Towns.*

seeks to encourage empathy from a broad audience, her "you" should not be understood as completely inclusive. The film's premise reminds us that she was interviewed by an all African American crew. Mullins directed her "you" at an African American cameraman and producer. While Mullins's sentiment shows her grasping for understanding and its inclusion serves to interpolate the emotions of a broad audience, the uncomplicated placement briefly detaches Byrd's death from the reason he was killed - his race. Especially in the context of the McQueen murder a few weeks earlier, the random and brutal quality elevated Byrd's murder beyond the status of other crimes in the minds of African Americans.[153] Elsewhere, Byrd's sister Clara Taylor portrayed the reality of Byrd's lynching more clearly: "It could have been anyone walking down the street. If they were black, that is."[154]

Even white residents of Jasper who vocally disapproved of the crime publicly sought privately to prevent Byrd's martyrdom and reduce greater white culpability. For Dow and Williams the break was clear:

> For the whites their understanding of the murder was inexorably tied to their perception of James Byrd, the man...the fact that Byrd was unemployed and had many past run-ins with the law either mitigated the gravity of the crime or somehow implicated Byrd in his own death....For blacks, how James Byrd lived his life was entirely irrelevant. He was killed because of his race and so, in effect they were James Byrd.[155]

One woman of the "Bubbas in Training" breakfast club felt that, "it's very wrong what they [Byrd's killers] done. But still...James Byrd wasn't the pillar of the community that

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[153] See n. 48.
[154] Firestone, "A Life Marked by Troubles, but Not by Hatred."
[155] *Neiman Reports*, 18.

they made him out to be."[156] Rather than confront the real reasons why Byrd was killed, the Bubbas focus on what they find to be objectionable aspects of James Byrd's life, as if that somehow made Byrd culpable in his own death. Remarkably, these sentiments echo early lynching apologists' focus on drifting and unemployed African American men as a threat and in need of social control, a problem for which lynching was an acceptable solution by supremacist standards. While many of the Bubbas appear on film attending unity religious services, or smiling about the convictions outside the courthouse, they maintain a certain wariness about embracing the full racial impact of the lynching. The filmmakers reinforce that feeling with numerous shots of the Bubbas gazing at the courthouse from the porch of the Belle-Jim Hotel. The impression left is that many white observers, while uncomfortable with the actual crime, remain aloof when it comes to facing a greater racial reality, a privilege that persists from the height of lynching.

Two Towns makes it easy to see why many of the city's African American residents reacted more strongly to the murderers' motives. Dow has commented that many black Jasperites could see themselves in Byrd's place. *Two Towns* shows the following conversation taking place at UNAV's Hair Salon, which the filmmakers position as an African American counter to the Bubbas in Training breakfast group:

> Salon Customer, Brenda: Everybody says it's an isolated incident. It is not. It has been going on for quite a while. It's never been to the magnitude of what it is now.
>
> Salon Customer: It never will be the same again... You always will look over your shoulder, wondering if it happened once, you know, it can happen again. [157]

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[156] *Two Towns*. During the very same scene, one of the "Bubbas" reads a newspaper article detailing James Byrd's life. To the authors portrait of Byrd the Bubbas add the comments: "...and drinking Thunderbird," as well as, "I thought he spent most of his time in jail." These comments produced laughter.

[157] *Two Towns*.

One of Byrd's sisters, Mylinda Washington contends later in the film that the "issue here, is not character. [It is a] racial killing, it's the way [Byrd] died."[158] Despite the lynching, racism continued in Jasper for blacks, and the murder merely resonated with real and figurative violence in the past. For Ethel Parks, knowledge of the exact way that James Byrd died had an unfortunate extension. Early in the film, Parks tells the story of her friend who had also been murdered by white people and left in the trunk of a car. While the film leaves the circumstances surrounding that murder unclear, it is apparent that Byrd's murder reminds her of past events.[159] When Lout recounts the pathologist's testimony, *Two Towns* shows it affects Parks and other members of the African American community intensely. While she said, "you wouldn't do that to a dog,"[160] the fact remains that the crime had been done, and to a *man*. Presumably, in her mind, it could happen again.

Portraying blacks' and whites' understanding of James Byrd's death as easily and clearly divergent *can* be seen as a problematic aspect of *Two Towns*. Dow and Williams leave little room for divergent opinion within specific racial communities, not to mention those Jasperites who might identify themselves as outside a white/black racial binary. In her study of lynching themes in literature, Sandra Gunning states that, "white supremacist versus black protest fiction, for instance, hardly represent monolithic camps."[161] Ayers repeatedly cites Reverend A.J. Stokes of Montgomery, Alabama, who even while opposing lynching proclaimed that "there never was a respectable colored man lynched in

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[158] *Two Towns*.
[159] *Two Towns*, Parks also indicates the secretive nature of the crime, stating that the reaction to her friends death, was very "hush, hush, you didn't talk about that." Like the Black Cat Society in the 1920's or the death of the young black man ruled a suicide – those incidents remained shrouded for various reasons including the vulnerability of African Americans at the time.
[160] *Two Towns*.
[161] Sandra Gunning, *Race, Rape, and Lynching* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 12.

the south [sic]....In the lynchings [he had] known about, the victims were always men in the community no one could say a good word for."[162] While Stokes' self-protective alignment with whites is understandable, his public waffling can be seen as indicative of larger stratifications among seemingly binary views on lynching. As such historical connections make a clean, unified break around the death of James Byrd improbable, the filmmakers' less than complicated portrayal does hinge on essentialism, as if all whites should be expected to act one way, and blacks another.

At a few points, however, Dow and Williams offer complications to their binary model, although they do not approach Gunning's version of pluralism. In some sense, Walter Diggles stands in as a conciliatory, African American opinion. Diggles, as Director of the Deep East Texas Council of Governments, had been asked by white business leaders and government officials to help ease tension in the black community. While Diggles denounces the crime and spends time with the Byrd family, he also expresses his belief that the Jasper prosecution team was "determined as ever to make the case" against Byrd's killers, without raising questions about a historical tendency toward for acquittal in cases of white-on-black violence.[163] No other African American expresses such ease with the ability of Texas government officials to secure a conviction, capitol or otherwise. Throughout the film Diggles seems preoccupied with moving on and lacks the confusion, anger, and hurt that many other African Americans display throughout the film. While Unav Wade states that "Black folk don't care about Rodeo day," Diggles rides shotgun as the Rodeo Parade Grand Marshall.[164] When Sean Berry only receives a

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[162] Qtd. In Ayers, *Vengeance and Justice*, 244. Ayers also discusses Stokes in *The Promise of the New South: Life After Reconstruction* (London : Oxford University Press, 1992).
[163] *Two Towns*.
[164] *Two Towns*.

life sentence instead of the death penalty, Diggles seems overtly pleased, while Ray Lewis appears less than enthusiastic on camera. Still, Diggles does express discomfort and pain when reading some of the hate mail he received during the trials. Walter Diggles's take on the Byrd lynching and race relations in Jasper significantly complicates Dow and Williams's depictions. Nuanced and complicated characters like Diggles, Gray, and Rowles increase the amount of cognitive work that *Two Towns* requires of the viewer, creating a stronger anchor in an audience's memory.

The tension surrounding the three trials also serves to highlight other events in Jasper with racial undertones, which Dow and Williams never quite resolve. In a prominent subplot, officials in Jasper took pains to remove a fence separating black and white sections of the Jasper cemetery. In *Jasper, Texas,* removal of the fence becomes a moment of celebration and reconciliation. Jasperites of many ages join hands in pulling up the fence, including Sheriff Rowles (Voight) and an African American character that previously slighted Rowles because he was white. In *Two Towns*, Reverend Kenneth Lyons and Father Ron Foshage express relief that part of the material legacy of segregation has disappeared from the graveyard. At the end of the film, however, when Ethel Parks' sister passes away, her family buries her alongside other relatives in the African American section; the same section where James Byrd, Jr. was buried.[165] Here, *Two Towns of Jasper* resists the easy resolution and emotional release of *Jasper, Texas*, ensuring that in some way the tension left by Byrd's lynching stays with an audience. Dow and Williams draw out complicated themes of larger historical significance in order to illustrate continuity in the legacies of racial violence.

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[165] After her sister's funeral, Parks cries, "The fence could've stayed up. It wasn't hurting anybody....I guess its just tradition." *Two Towns.*

Additionally, *Two Towns* represents the lynching of James Byrd through the details about the crime. Still, Dow and Williams manage to include these gruesome aspects largely without sensationalism, and without the visual recreations of *Jasper, Texas*. In *Two Towns*, the impact of graphic visuals is effectively replaced by the emotion of the Byrd family and the earnestness of the Jasper County District Attorney. Guy James Gray refers mostly to material and physical evidence used in the case, as well as details of the killers' racism. African American characters exhibit primary control of the details surrounding James Byrd's experience and the Byrd family alone holds the privilege of imagining his pain. Allowing African Americans to speak candidly and openly about Byrd's death, while expressing its regularity, in some ways signifies a change from the guarded memories of racial terror suggested by Bruce Baker about the early twentieth century South.[166] At the same time, older, secretly kept memories of violence are aired and bridge the gaps between spectacle lynchings and that of James Byrd, Jr. Dow and Williams rely primarily on language to convey the horrific nature of the lynching, while including the aspects of mutilation that Hale and Ayers argue were well understood by the turn of the twentieth century. *Two Towns of Jasper* represents the violent and extreme aspects of Byrd's mutilation entirely through second-hand narration, but without any loss of impact, suggesting the stamina of such traumatic acts in memory.

One of the most haunting strategies of representing the Byrd lynching in *Two Towns*, recreates the videotape of Huff Creek Road used against the three defendants in their murder trials. Including images of a real site of racial violence brings to mind the arguments of Bruce Baker regarding the importance of physical and genealogical space as an anchor of African American memory. In Baker's study, familial connection, as well

[166] Baker, "Under the Rope."

as connection to place, determined whether or not lynchings were remembered; when evidence could be tied to physical space or kinship relations, those lynchings were more likely to be maintained in memory. As the Coleman morticians retell their recognition of the trail of "tissue...hide, bloody skin tissue,"[167] Dow and Williams cut to still and moving photographs of faded blood stains. Without the spectacle of the *Jasper, Texas* dragging, this opening still scene manages to convey the brutality of the crime – aided by the "indexical whammy" of the stains' existence in the real world and our trust that Donnie and Rodney Coleman are real Jasper morticians. Our mind wanders to that same spot when Mike Lout recounts on-air how Byrd's elbows were worn down, and is further reinforced by Ethel Parks's comments that "you wouldn't do that to a dog."[168]

By opening and closing their film with shots of Huff Creek Road, Dow and Williams link the lynching of Byrd to an actual physical space, allow it to return to the audience's mind throughout and after the film. As Rowles narrates, the film includes daytime footage of the road, as if the viewer were driving over the road themselves. At one point the camera zooms all the way into the asphalt before losing focus and fading out. After the opening scenes that recount the recovery of Byrd's body, visuals of the road disappear from *Two Towns*. For the audience, though, Byrd's murder is linked to a specific, physical location. The memory of exactly what happened on Huff Creek Road lingers for the duration of the film. As Byrd family members mention the killing, the viewer can recall a rural quietness about the road that conflicts with the horror of what occurred there. Dow and Williams use the Huff Creek landscape as a "sort of communicational resource, a system of signs and symbols, capable of extending the

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[167] *Two Towns.*
[168] *Two Towns.*

temporal and spatial range of communication," in this case a symbol for the death of James Byrd, Jr.[169] A short night time clip of that same road, with little visible beyond the murky light and blurry asphalt concludes the film. Book-ending the film with Huff Creek Road in such a way not only mirrors the road's weight upon the collective memory of Jasper, but it ensures the endurance of that visual in the mind of the audience. The transition from light to darkness suggests that, whatever notions of the racial landscape were "clear" for some Jasperites, they have only become murkier in the aftermath of James Byrd's lynching. Additionally, Dow and Williams's nocturnal ending shot reflects the viewer's complicated relationship with what they have just seen, and invites an imaginative return to both the road and the night where Byrd died.

For some, a graphic visualization of Byrd's dragged and decimated body, like that offered by *Jasper, Texas* ensures that the act remains in memory and the full gruesomeness can be realized. Ashraf Rushdy has also attempted to link the Byrd murder with equally infamous lynchings of Emmet Till and Claude Neal. Rushdy cites Mamie Till-Mobley's insistence on an open-casket funeral and the subsequent *Jet* pictorial as motivating a generation of young African American activists as well as previously ambivalent southern whites. With respect to a Byrd family wish that no pictures of Byrd's body be released, Rushdy also acknowledges the potential of violent images as tools for change; "representations [of brutality] are critical to the education of the majority of white Americans who believe that racism was a phenomenon that ended sometime in the sixties."[170] Understandably, visual evidence on the gruesomeness of Byrd's fate possesses an impact that cannot be denied. The ability of violence to shock

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[169] Kenneth E. Foote, *Shadowed Ground: America's Landscapes of Violence and Tragedy* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 33.
[170] Ashraf Rushdy, "Exquisite Corpse," *Transition* 9, no. 3 (2000): 75.

and startle, remains an asset of which *Jasper, Texas* claims some advantage and *Two Towns* foregoes.

Yet, despite dealing with an historic event that demands an emotional response and cognitive relation, the fictional violence of *Jasper, Texas* requires only superficial investment, and even provides a false kind of cathartic resolution. Documentary theorists have claimed that recreations suffer from "a body too many"; the true body of James Byrd, Jr. never gets included; the actor playing his pain can stand up and walk away.[171] On the converse side, *Two Towns of Jasper* might be said to suffer from "a body too few," in that no physical manifestations of James Byrd Jr. appear on screen.[172] Without an image of Byrd, how might Dow and Williams seek to reconstruct the trauma of his murder? Put another way, "How can we vivify the contradictions of an event that is itself constructed of the unimaginable, unwatchable, the unbearable?"[173]

Whitney Dow and Marco Williams largely rely on Guy James Gray's narration to give details as to the mind state of the small lynch mob and factual details of the evidence. Gray appears on film as part of press conferences as well as in private sessions, but even private interviews are delivered in a tone that suggests the prosecutor speaking to a jury. At the beginning of the King trial District Attorney Gray tells the press corps, "It's more brutal and more racial than you guys anticipate. A bad case."[174] The racial motivations of the three murderers become anchored early on by Gray's review of their racist tattoos:

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[171] Nichols, "Getting to Know You," 177-180.
[172] In *Two Towns*, a family photograph and a portrait of James Byrd, Jr. are the two exceptions.
[173] Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 237.

[174] *Two Towns*.

> Bill King was absorbed with these terrorist type organizations that exist throughout our country. You get a general idea [by] what he has on his body, where you have his gang affiliation, Confederate Knights of America, his Nazi affiliation with the lightning bolts, Aryan pride, one here is the little tattoo of a hanging black man, that's blown up, next to a Klansman in a robe, holding his hat and a burning cross. Did the same thing on Brewer, but you've got the triangular Klan affiliation, Confederate Knights of America, there's his patch, Klan, burning cross, confederate flag.[175]

Bill King's tattoo of a black man hanging from a tree certainly shows that he possessed at least some knowledge of the history and imagery of lynching.

Much of the evidence narrated by white characters in *Two Towns* echoes private lynching patterns quite closely. As Gray states of Byrd, "the victim was alone on a dark street... [a] pretty easy target,"[176] on the night that he was murdered. Even in an attempt to extricate his own brother, Louis Berry set a frightening scene similar to accounts of many private lynchings committed by killers sharing his brother's mindset: "they got to a secluded area, where nobody would know, there's no houses, ain't no streetlights, this is it right here, nobody'll know."[177] As Gray indicates earlier in the film, the three murderers truly felt as if they would not be punished for such a crime, committed in the darkest hours on a back-country road. Gray argues:

> the chain was there, the opportunity was there, [the three killers had] been drinking beer, they were all hyped up, like a pack of dogs on the heels of a deer, and they just chained him up and started dragging him[178]

Markedly different from Louis Berry's version of a pre-planned execution, Gray evokes a midnight scene of excited lynch mobs similar to the written accounts recorded by Walter White.

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[175] *Two Towns.*
[176] *Two Towns.*
[177] *Two Towns.*
[178] *Two Towns.*

Gray claims on film that the killers operated "back in a mindset that goes back to the 1920's, 1930's."[179] While some of the filmmakers' own respondents might take issue with Gray's subsequent claim that the killers were "out of touch with the real world," the point of including Gray's summation provides a temporal link for the audience. It seems unlikely that the similarity of King's actions with the tradition that produced images akin to his tattoo could be a coincidence. While the film offers no commentary from the murderers themselves on whether they would escape punishment, it seems possible to read their actions as an extension of that hanging body tattooed on Bill King. Mentally anchored in a time period when the white majority found their actions acceptable, even necessary, the murderers reproduced a history referenced by King's body art. Acting in a small mob, and believing they would not be prosecuted, they leaned upon the cycle passed to them through white supremacist action and thought.

Given the filmmakers' access to District Attorney Gray outside of court, it initially seems surprising that they do not include evidence of Byrd's wounds. Instead, it seems that Dow and Williams sought to avoid the voyeurism and fetishization of Byrd's body and turned instead to members of the Byrd family for more tragic details. Not only does this allow the Byrd family to retain control of their James, Jr.'s experience, but it avoids the deeper objectifying consequences of racial violence, that *Jasper, Texas* could be said to reproduce. Furthermore, Mike Lout's role as omnipresent narrator seems instructive. Radio's reliance on language and privileging of voice in some ways echoes the very same preferences of the filmmakers.

Members of the Byrd family shown speaking to the press in *Two Towns* repeatedly remind us of the brutality with which Byrd was killed. While it might be

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[179] *Two Towns*.

claimed that reiterating Byrd's cries or injuries in public were part of a media strategy during an important court case, *Two Towns* manages to position them as attempts to publicize racist violence on the level of NAACP or Mamie Till-Mobley.[180] The Byrd family publicly strove to move past anger. Similar to the work of Wells-Barnett and others, though, references to the more difficult aspects of the lynching helped to assure that it could influence the way people viewed the trials by ensuring the exposure of their brutality. Important to note here is the absence of any male characters narrating James Byrd, Jr.'s experience. On the one hand, then, *Two Towns* recreates the symbolic erasure of a black male voice accomplished by lynching. Also, Dow and Williams position African American women as the primary voice to speak against that violence. This choice might be read simultaneously as a nod to Wells-Barnett's pioneering activism as well as a corrective for the countless African American women left as helpless witnesses.

Allowing the Byrd family to retain some manner of ownership over the portrayal of Byrd's death also gave Dow and Williams a chance to portray the tremendous sense of emotional anguish caused by the lynching. Interestingly, the Byrds' memories of the killing are not really first-hand memories of James Jr.'s death, but stand as the most performative aspect of the documentary. This is in no way to say that their imaginative recreations of the lynching are without basis, but rather, in the words of one Bubba, to remember that "nobody really knows the truth. Except, you know, three of them that's still living know what happened."[181] As there were no outside witnesses to the actual crime, the words that family members use to describe the violence of the crime are

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[180] Rushdy discusses Till-Mobley's insistence on an open-casket funeral and the publication of a photo essay in *Jet*; "the victim's body became less an icon of white supremacy than a denunciation of it," (Rushdy, "Exquisite Corpse," 76).
[181] *Two Towns*.

necessarily constructed. Sometimes they are built from details that emerged in the course of the trials. In one sidewalk interview mentioned above, Stella Brumley laments how Sean Berry watched as the killers "zig-zagged [Byrd] across the road...spray painted him. Just to enjoy somebody's suffering. Sean Berry has no kind of heart, to just sit there and enjoy somebody's suffering." Another sister's recollection speaks more to the burden of imagination: "I will forever visualize what my brother went through. I guess I will forever hear his cries in the dark."[182]

The descriptions of the murder given by the Byrd family, while speculative on some level, manage to retain their impact because of the obvious emotional magnitude they evoke. Bill Nichols speculates that vivification, making the effects of violence felt, can achieve a fuller representation of those traumas: "affective ties must be forged obliquely, between viewer and representation but in relation to the historical referent."[183] Nichols raises this notion in terms of the physical, but stresses that its participatory aspects are what should carry the most weight. In that, sense, it is possible to see the emotional toll of Byrd's death as pushing its representation of the violence of lynching past the sensational action of *Jasper, Texas* in terms of affect. The emotional impact provided by the Byrd family members, produces a similar felt response in an audience, one of the primary requirements to activate *Two Towns* as a kind of prosthetic memory.

In the quiet reflection of *Two Towns of Jasper* the physical pain of James Byrd, Jr. becomes rendered in the faces and tears of those that survived him. Rather than attempting sensational representations of Byrd's death, Dow and Williams couple verbal accounts of brutality with the visuals of emotions to ensure the audience gains some

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[182] *Two Towns.*
[183] Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 235.

sense of the magnitude of the trauma visited upon both James Byrd, Jr. and the town of Jasper. Stella Brumley's sidewalk interview ties the audience's imaginings of James Byrd's death to her quivering voice and tearing eyes. Renee Mullins appears drained and speaks softly about her father's disappearance. Examples abound, and yet one subtle, graphically unremarkable scene encompasses them all. As the Byrd children and well-wishers depart from Stella Byrd's house on the evening before the verdict is to be delivered in the trial of Sean Berry, Stella Byrd occupies her small living room alone. Wearing her age and the burden of raising a large African American family in the poverty of the South, Mrs. Byrd sits quietly, in front of a large television. A news anchorwoman's voice comes distinctly through the background: "Do you say to yourself, why is this happening to me? I mean, as if I hadn't been through enough?" Stella Byrd sighs and looks down at her hands.[184]

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On June 13, 2005, Senators of the 109th United States Congress took turns speaking in support of Senate Resolution 39, an official apology to the families of lynching victims for the Senate's repeated failure to pass anti-lynching legislation.[185] While much of the commentary blended together as righteous political posturing, a few aspects deserve notice here. Senators Barack Obama and George Allen both referred to the impact of lynching photography, and wonder "not only what the lynching did to the family member [sic] of those who were lynched, but also what the effect was on the

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[184] *Two Towns.*

[185] Park, "Lynching and Anti-Lynching," 311-365.Between 1882 and 1933, 61 anti-lynching bills were introduced to Congress. By 1951 the total had risen to 257. While some passed the House of Representatives, all failed in the U.S. Senate.

sensibilities of those young people who stood there watching."[186] Senator Allen thanked James Allen by name for publishing his collection of lynching photographs, *Without Sanctuary*. Perhaps merely an effort to reference important historical scholarship, the Senator's rhetoric also illustrated the impact of the Allen-Littlefield collection as a kind of prosthetic memory. The desire of politicians to engage with the Allen-Littlefield collection speaks to the pervasiveness of the not yet fully confronted trauma of lynching as well as the power of lynching images.

Despite the Senators' good intentions, their speech hid a troubling misconception. Repeatedly, Senator Allen and others referred to lynching in the past tense, as a phenomenon that disappeared with the gains of the Civil Rights Movement in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Senator John Kerry bracketed the history of lynching by the years 1880 and 1968, a span that some more conservative Senators would likely consider too broad.[187] Some historians, such as W. Fitzhugh Brundage claim that lynchings disappeared by the 1950s and were replaced by isolated racial violence, as if the effects of that violence were felt in any different way.[188] Admittedly, spectacle lynchings attended by thousands and captured in photographs no longer occur. However, such a neat and tidy historical ending to the trauma of lynching not only seems reductive, it rings somewhat false. While one might argue that the methods of orchestrating terror have changed slightly and the names by which we speak about such events are sometimes different, at their core these crimes originate from the same feelings of racial supremacy and produce the same effect in those that are left behind as witnesses. While this project does not intend to reduce the importance of specific kinds of ritual violence most

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[186] Barack Obama, Senate Resolution 39, 109th Congress, *Congressional Record* (June 13, 2005): S6375.
[187] John Kerry, Senate Resolution 39, 109th Congress, *Congressional Record* (June 13, 2005): S6374.
[188] Brundage, *Lynching in the New South*, 252.

commonly associated with the height of lynching in the early twentieth century, it does seek to broaden an understanding of lynching to one that includes a persistent, racially intimidating violence that continues to this day.

While certain familiar themes from distant histories of lynching might slide out of the story, only to reappear elsewhere, similarities in the narratives that surround more recent traumas remain very much the same. While some might wish to call these crimes by other names, the violent work intended by these acts differs little from that of the thousands of public lynchings conducted between 1880 and 1930. Even the many uncountable lynchings conducted under cover of darkness, or purposefully ignored in mainstream press, produced the same effect as their more public counterparts. Private lynching mobs manufactured an absence which spoke as clearly as any photograph, newspaper account, or bodily remains, at least to the ears of African Americans. How we choose to tell the stories of this violence can have lasting effects on memory and the way people understand their identity in wake of racial violence. Examining those strategies of narration and memory can become one way to situate more recent violence in lynching's long legacy, and perhaps influence the thinking of those that explain away the significance of what happened in Jasper. The lynching of James Byrd, Jr. and the two films produced in its wake allow us to see how racialized violence persists in many ways, and how strategies for representing that violence might broaden our understanding.[189]

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[189] The issues of representing racial violence merely touched on here certainly bear further consideration. On December 11, 2005 the University of Colorado suspended one of its football players for sending an offensive email to a Hispanic member of the schools cross country team. In the email, Clint O'Neal indicated that he intended to tie the young runner up and drag him behind his car. O'Neal lives in Weatherford, Texas; located just on the other side of Dallas from Jasper. It seems quite likely, given his hometown and age that O'Neal would know something about the death of James Byrd, Jr. While one cannot be certain if O'Neal ever saw *Jasper, Texas*, or *Two Towns of Jasper*, or if seeing either might have had any benefit - incidents like this remind as that the further we move temporally from an act of violence

During a courthouse press conference included in *Two Towns of Jasper*, a reporter asks Mary Verrett to describe her feelings about how her brother, James Byrd, Jr. died. Verrett declines, "there's no word...to even describe that feeling."[190] If language inevitably fails us, then how can anyone ever comprehend the trauma that Byrd experienced? Furthermore, how might one go about trying to convey the terror of Byrd's murder and the weight of his absence? In that effort, *Jasper, Texas* offers a dramatic recreation that attempts to represent bodily some manner of the trauma experienced by James Byrd, Jr. Indeed, Jeff Byrd's spectacular and horrific recreation borders on the grotesque, and risks alienating an audience as well as objectifying James Byrd in a new way. The simplifications and fictionalizations in *Jasper, Texas* help to soften the edge on that violence, and humanize the events so that a broad audience might be able to feel some connection with the people of Jasper and specifically with the grief of the Byrd family. The shocking impact of the bodily image, as well as a reflexive connection created by the development of the Rowles and Horn characters, makes *Jasper, Texas* effective as a kind of prosthetic memory for a mass audience. While the inventions of Jeff Byrd and Jonathan Estrin whitewash some aspects of the crime, *Jasper, Texas* represents the corporeal experience and trauma of the Byrd lynching in a way that the complexities of *Two Towns of Jasper* do not approach.

Marco Williams and Whitney Dow, however, resist simplification and spectacle in the way that they represent Byrd's death and its aftermath. In some ways, the filmmakers do reinforce the absence of humanity that a lynching produces, but they also attempt to capture the pain and fear left where James Byrd, Jr. once lived. Combining

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the more care we should take in how we remember it. The Associated Press, "Buffs Player Suspended for Sending Racist E-Mail" (http://sports.espn.go.com/ncf/news/story?id=2256084).

[190] *Two Towns.*

evidentiary details of the crime, the emotional void felt by Byrd's family members, and an indexical relationship to a real landscape, Dow and Williams approximate via film the "nexus of genealogy and geography" that Bruce Baker cites as "an anchor for memory."[191] By probing the fissures between black and white memories of racial violence, and race relations in Jasper County, Dow and Williams flesh out immensely complicated issues of race. Above all they magnify the gap in the ways that African Americans and white Jasperites understand the death of James Byrd, Jr. For black Jasperites, Byrd's death was closely tied to a long history of violence and the exact kind of terror and vulnerability lynching was meant to inspire. By drawing the viewer into those kinds of discussions, *Two Towns* creates a self-reflexive, cognitive process that carves out a space in the memory of the viewer.

In the video preface that accompanies *Two Towns of Jasper*, Marco Williams describes the lynching of Byrd as "an incident that magnifies difference, and what people do when threatened by difference."[192] As our notions of difference seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon, what promise do these films offer in preventing similar racial violence? Mayor Horn's dinner-table admonition, while overly dramatic, seems instructive: "it's dangerous to remember...because then, you *got* to do something."[193] *Jasper, Texas*, and especially *Two Towns of Jasper* make clear that lynching and racial violence cannot be considered as strictly part of the past. By connecting Byrd's death to a long history these films make an important connection. As forms of prosthetic memory, these two films illustrate the tragic consequences of an attempt to violently erase difference, both physically and psychologically, and secure those messages in the mind of

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[191] Baker, "Under The Rope," 335.
[192] *Two Towns*.
[193] *Jasper, Texas*, Chapter Ten.

an audience. Additionally, the films offer the chance for people to recognize difference, and work through some of the problematic issues that surround perceptions of difference in our daily lives; to borrow from Ethel Parks, "coming together, that's what we need."[194] Though widely divergent in their means of representing the lynching of James Byrd, Jr., *Two Towns of Jasper* and *Jasper, Texas* can affect the connection between a dark past and an evolving present, and they should be judged successful in appropriately different ways.

[194] *Two Towns*.

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